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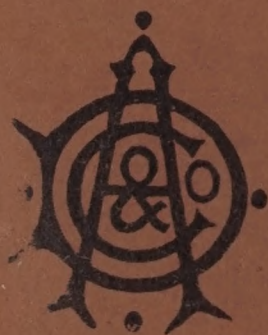
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DUST AND LAURELS

*A Study in
Nineteenth Century Womanhood*

BY MARY L. PENDERED



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DUST AND LAURELS

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DUST AND LAURELS

A STUDY IN
NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMANHOOD

BY
MARY L. PENDERED

"Have the high gods anything left to give,
Save dust and laurels and gold and sand?"
SWINBURNE



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1894

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TO THAT HYBRID COMPLICATION,
THE WOMAN OF TO-DAY,
WHOSE FOOD
IS FRUIT OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL,
AND WHOSE DRINK
IS THE INTOXICATING ETHER OF FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE,
THIS LITTLE STUDY IS DEDICATED, WITH BEST WISHES,
BY THE AUTHOR.

“Treat the woman tenderly, tenderly,
Out of a crooked rib God made her slenderly, slenderly,
Straight and strong He did not make her,
So, if you try to bend, you’ll break her.”

OLD RHYME.

NOTE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION.

WHEN the Messrs. Appleton made me an offer to publish my little study, "*Dust and Laurels*," in the United States, I experienced a keen sense of satisfaction. I said to myself, "Now my *Veronica* will have a chance." Nearly every English reviewer of "*Dust and Laurels*" flattered me and abused my heroine. I do not wish to defend her peccadilloes, or register her as a "model of all the virtues"; but there are a few words I want to say on her behalf to my American readers.

In the first place, I should like to guard against a recurrence of an erroneous impression obtaining here that *Veronica* is intended as a *type of* nineteenth-century womanhood. She is a *study in* nineteenth century womanhood, and surely the difference is obvious. I deny that I have wronged my sex in laying

bare its weaknesses, and at the same time maintain that *Veronica* is not a monster. In my opinion, the best kind of optimism is that expressed in the old Greek hymn to Zeus: "Thou dost so harmonise into one all good and evil things that there should be one everlasting reason of them all." And the "realism" of "*Dust and Laurels*" is but a protest against our weak dread of seeing things as they are, instead of as we try to think we should like them to be. In an old country a light habit of thought clings till the mind is moulded by it, and we have made such a fashion of idealism that it becomes sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that men and women are not roses and lilies.

MARY L. PENDERED.

DUST AND LAURELS.

CHAPTER I.

“Men and women are only half human. Every animal of the barnyard, the field and the forest, of the earth, and the waters that are under the earth, has contrived to get a footing, and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers.”—EMERSON.

“It is certainly appalling!”

There had been a long silence before this sentence, and the mind of the listener had drifted from the previous subject, as minds of listeners will, so she asked vaguely—

“Yes? What is appalling? you mean”—

“I mean this masterful power of *touch* that unstrings all your resolutions and paralyses your intentions. The mere contact of a hand may send a darting fire up all your arteries, and seem to change your whole nature, just when you feel strongest. Can you understand this?”

"I think so. The hand of some one you love?"

"Oh, that is not what I mean at all! Take love out of consideration altogether. Love is all fire and thrill, bracing you to noble enthusiasms and self-sacrificing ideals. I mean—but I don't believe you can possibly understand,"—lowering her voice,—“I mean something on a widely different plane; something you hate and loathe yourself for; something belonging to the masculinity of a man that drives back the part you call your soul, and makes you forget there is divinity in you. You are only conscious of sensation, and scarcely of that. It is brutal!” she broke off abruptly.

"I don't think I do understand," said the other slowly. "I don't know the feeling. You seem to be differently made from me, Vera: I often think so."

"Differently trained, you mean. Have you never heard of atrophy from disuse, Sylvia? You have never in your life, I suppose, played with your emotions and analysed them. At the first indication of such a sensation as I describe, your whole training would have caused you to revolt, and you would

never run into risk again. Now, had you been, as I was, fed on romances from your cradle; then, before your petticoats were long, thrown into the society of vapid, weak, and frivolous companions, whose general conversation hinged upon bread and ale and kisses—would you have been the calm, innocent, equable-minded daisy you are? Not likely! Depend upon it, Sylvia, it is the teen stage of a girl's life that determines her future of good or evil. I can no more throw off the effects of the influences that surrounded me at sixteen than I can throw off my skin! They are fibred right into my system, so much so that if a man makes love to me whom I despise, when I want to be angry I laugh! I mislead others and don't know myself—no—no more than I know what lies in my future.”

At the end of this speech the talker, who had been pacing the room excitedly, threw herself into a lounging-chair by the window, near where her friend sat watching her, and clasped both hands above her head.

She was a tall woman, on the kindest side of thirty, and most people considered her handsome. Just now she looked exceedingly

so, for there was a feverish light in her long olive-tinted eyes which turned them unusually large under the straight black brows, and the red in her cheeks gave them a grey colour.

Her eyes were always the strongest point in her face's favour. You could never tell what colour they were going to appear next, and the darkness of the lashes generally cast an unfathomable shadow into them.

Her hair was fair,—the sort of sandy fairness that often goes with black eyebrows,—but it was prettily shaded here and there in gold and bronze, and very conciliable. Her skin was good without being brilliant, and her features picturesque without being beautiful. In short, she was one of the thousands of women who depend upon moods and conditions for their good looks. She could be plain or pretty according to varying circumstances. At present she was pretty. Her arms were bare, and very white, her thick hair loose, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashing. Sylvia thought how very beautiful she was in the subdued light of the bedroom, which was struggling with the moonlight from the window. But then she was an ardent devotee, pretty, gentle Sylvia, of this friend

of hers,—so ardent as never to shrink from Vera when she was really exasperatingly unconventional and terrible. It seemed terrible to Sylvia to hear Vera talk lightly of a flirtation such as the latter was indulging in now, and pity herself for being unable to resist it. She could not comprehend such a thing. No man would ever have been able to flirt with Sylvia; and as for a man already married—it was incomprehensible!

She looked very serious as she fixed two clear brown eyes on the other's attractive face.

“Then you don't really care for Captain Dalton, Vera?” she said, with a dubious intonation. Why any one should care to be everlastingly in the society of a man she did not love, was a mystery to Sylvia.

“No, child. Only this much—I think about him, and wonder what colours he likes to see me in best, and act for his edification when I am talking, or singing, or dancing with other people. And when he comes up to me and says something in a low voice, I feel frantic with delight. That's all!”

“And you don't love him?” reiterated Sylvia.

“No. Haven’t I told you a hundred times that I love but one man, and him simply to distraction. You know his name,” in a low voice; “it is Garrick Maitland. There isn’t room for two such feelings in that unaccountable organism of mine, which I dare not call a heart. If Garry came here, you would see a change. I should be perfectly quiet and perfectly miserable. I am always beautifully miserable when he is by; that is how I know I love him. Captain Dalton doesn’t make me feel the least bit unhappy.”

“But you probably make Mrs. Dalton feel the least bit unhappy.”

“I think not. She doesn’t see much, and she is so used to his manner of conducting himself, that I expect nothing would make her jealous.”

“Should you like to make her jealous, Vera?” Sylvia asked this in very solemn tones, after a slight pause.

Vera hesitated. Then her lips parted into a wicked smile, and the dark eyebrows arched themselves.

“It is a difficult question, Daisy,” she said. “It would give a great flavour, wouldn’t it? It is not much fun to think a man is only say-

ing the same things to you that he has said to a score of other women, and that his wife knows, and is laughing at you, is it?"

"Oh, don't, Vera!" cried the girl, in real pain; this tone shocked her. "You don't mean what you say. I have known you go out of your way to do a kindness too often to believe that you would like that poor little woman to suffer."

"Suffer!" The laugh on Vera's lips faded out. "No," she said impetuously; "I would rather suffer myself, if it came to that. I did not mean it—oh, no! Sylvia, do you think, if you studied me very hard, you could interpret me to myself? I would give you *carte blanche* to be quite candid and disagreeable. Tell me now, on first thoughts, what do you think of me?"

"Think of you!" the other echoed faintly. She was not given to placing her friend under the microscope of analytic criticism. She could only pause and say slowly—

"I—really don't know what I do think of you—actually—except that, while I am proud of your friendship, I am sometimes very disappointed in you—when you flirt with Captain Dalton, for instance. For it is flirting

after all, you know, and a very small thing. You ought to be above that."

"Why ought I to be above that? Because I am studying with a view to Oxford honours, and have written a fairly successful work of fiction? My dearest Sylvia, these are parts of one whole—a craving for sensation and excitement. Why do you contemplate college life with such delight and longing? why wish to lose yourself in an atmosphere of solid erudition? Tell me that."

The girl with the unspoilt brown eyes looked very thoughtful as she sought expression for an answer. She was utterly unaccustomed to ask herself why she desired things.

"I suppose because I love books and study better than anything else in the world," she said finally.

Vera laughed softly.

"I knew that was what you would say," she said; "but you deceive yourself, my little Sylvia. You could have books enough here, and read all day long if you wished. I am sure that dear devoted mother and that proud father of yours would never deny you anything that could be bought with honest round

shillings No; you want the excitement of the race, all the life of the struggle, a chance of the prize. Of course you do, for all your soft, dreamy earnestness and love of dear books for their own sakes. Don't try to delude me with yourself. I have marked the necessity for excitement in the pages of life. It is written plainly enough, in your first volume as in my second, which is just begun. It is becoming importunate. I can't get away from it, this longing for sensation; and as most forms of it are getting stale to me, I am entering for the stakes of learning, by way of a change. Seest thou?"

"Then I wish you would completely devote yourself to learning, and eschew less worthy means of 'sensation,' as you call it," said Sylvia, with a vision of Captain Dalton hovering behind Vera's fair head. To her surprise, the only rejoinder was a startling question.

"Sylvia, do you think he likes me?"

"Who?"

"Captain Dalton. You knew whom I meant."

"I don't know, and I don't care."

She rose abruptly, puzzled and angry at the question, which she considered unworthy of

her friend. Vera rose too, and put her arms round her.

“Don’t be vexed with me, dear innocent,” she pleaded, with witching eyes and melting voice. “You must take a friend for better or worse, as you would a husband, don’t you know? And remember my training, which was completely low-class and frivolous. I belong to the ‘upper ten’ neither by birth nor education, and I have grown up as I liked, a very weed, possibly, but one you have planted in your garden, so must make the best of it. I won’t do anything really bad to make you ashamed of me, I promise you.”

“I know you won’t.” The pensive face lightened. “But, Vera, why talk like this, calling yourself a weed, when you know you are a very gorgeous flower, but growing wild by mistake? Can’t you prune yourself, somehow, and leave off clinging to mouldy walls?”

“If you allude to Captain Dalton as a mouldy wall—”

“Don’t be silly. I allude to your craving for excitement in any form, which you have just now confessed. Vera, you are too great to let your actions be small.”

“On the contrary, sweetheart, I am too

small to let my actions be great. But, as I began by saying, I believe I could be one-centred and whole-souled as you are, if only this sense of touch were not so strong upon me. The firm hand of a man when it touches mine, or rests on my waist in dancing, makes me faint, and I lose all my strength in a consciousness of femininity. Not all men, you know, but some, overpower me like that."

"And it all arises from your craving for novelty of impression, you think?"

"I don't know, Sylvia. Most likely. If I could but get into a world where there were no men, what a woman I could be. Splendid! Oh, but wouldn't it be intolerably dull? Isn't it curious how all parts of one's nature contradict each other, until one doesn't know what one wants?"

"I know what I want," said her friend, who by this time was brushing out long strands of hair before a glass: "I want to go to bed, and not to discuss metaphysical questions." Her words were thick, because of the hair in her mouth.

"Very well." Vera likewise sought a brush. "Let us, then, as our friend 'No end of a joke' would say, 'chuck metaphysics,'

and adjourn this interesting discussion upon the character of Veronica Grace until the 'lark at heaven's gate sings, and winking marybuds'— What is it that 'winking marybuds' do? Oh, I know! 'begin to ope' something— 'eyes,' I think. Sylvia, why is 'A priori' so fond of hearing me sing 'Who is Sylvia?'"

There was a murmured exclamation as the person addressed let fall a hairpin, and stooped to regain it.

"How should I know?" she said, when that action had been performed. "Because you sing it so well, I suppose, and it is a lovely song."

"But 'A priori' is not fond of music, dear Sylvia."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, because he never listens when I sing anything else."

Silence.

The last thing heard in the room was Vera's voice, muffled in bedclothes, chanting softly—

"Holy, fair, and wise is she,
The heavens such grace did lend her,
That adorèd she might be,
That adorèd she might be."

CHAPTER II.

“Love is the art of hearts and heart of arts.”

BAILEY.

THERE was a small but comfortable party staying at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Ford Grant in the prettiest part of Surrey. Mr. and Mrs. Ford Grant were comfortable people to know, and you felt sure of a hearty welcome and pleasant times under their roof, providing you did not happen to be of very “smart” proclivities, or afraid whom you might meet. They were people who might have shone in Society (with the largest of S’s); for Mr. Grant, the son of a distinguished soldier, holding a dignified post under Government, and married to the daughter of a big Church gun, was entitled to the right hand of fellowship throughout the magic circle of those who have breathed a kiss upon the hand of their sovereign. Indeed, both he and Mrs. Grant had gone through the above-mentioned ceremony themselves, and

very relieved they were when it was over ! But they were not fashionable people. They dined at seven, and did not run after lions, and only cultivated the people who really amused and interested them.

This is partly to account for the presence of Veronica Grace in their house : she being of distinctly middle-class origin, and, with quite beautiful directness, having told Mrs. Ford Grant at once that her father was a tradesman. She even had alluded to her friends in the trading community quite plainly, showing some familiarity with the ways and manners of butchers and bakers in private life, and no shame in acknowledging the same.

Perhaps this may have helped to convince Sylvia's father and mother of the originality and natural distinction of the girl whom their daughter had picked up at a meeting of University Extension students. For they were people who, liking and daring to be unconventional themselves, were instinctively drawn towards that disposition in others. But in any case, any one whom Sylvia liked was sure to be taken to the hearts of her parents without reserve. She was their only child, a petted but unspoilt darling ; receiving from them a

happy, though somewhat serious temperament, and a most careful training. She was as uncomplicated in machinery as it is possible for a girl to be, who has more than average mental capacity and a profound nature. Having taken to books as a lark takes to sunlight, she soared somewhat beyond the average young lady of her class, who is bounded by devotion to toilette, and appetite for masculine attentions.

Why she had fallen in love with Veronica in such an eager and spontaneous manner is perhaps a little puzzling; but it is possible that the strong individuality, warm sympathy, and great personal magnetism of the elder woman inundated a certain dry place in her heart before reason had time to check the deluge.

Be that as it may, she came home with glowing accounts of the charming, talented girl she had met during her stay at the University, who could do everything, and whom the professors stopped to flatter and encourage. She had found her as earnest as herself in pursuit of knowledge, and a fascinating associate, amusing as well as inspiring. So that Mrs. Grant was delighted to invite the new star to her house as a companion for

Sylvia, who had gone quite college mad, and was imploring for a future of Somerville. This was the first visit, and so far it had been a huge success. Vera was the animating genius of the house-party—an informal party of genial people, all gathered together anyhow, apparently, yet fitting together extremely well. The middle-aged politicians of Mr. Ford Grant's own circle of friends found her most entertaining, with her half-and-half views enthusiastically expressed, and her quick generalisations. The serious young men (who were represented by a pale curate,—invited because he had few friends and was ill from over-work,—and a clever young professor whom Vera called “A priori”) found her intently responsive, and were always only half ready for her sudden changes from savage earnestness to satirical flippancy. The boys, of whom there were two, nicknamed by her “No end of a joke” and “Bounder,” for their constant repetition of the two expressions, adored and watched her. All the women liked her, presumably; especially the two or three young girls of Sylvia's age, whom Sylvia scorned as water-flies; and Captain Dalton, the husband of a distant cousin of the Ford

Grants, selected her as his antidote against the *ennui* that assailed him on most occasions. He distinguished Vera with as much homage as it was safe to show, and was generally in her background.

It was the day of the Tennis Tournament, to be held a few miles from the house, in the grounds of a friend, for a charity ; and Mrs. Ford Grant, always down first, was watering the flowers in her conservatory, about as happy and free from care as the bees and bluebottles that buzzed around her.

“ Ah ! good morning, Frank,” she said, half turning her head, and giving an orchid an over-dose by reason of the same. “ Have you had breakfast ? ”

Frank—who, by the way, corresponded to the title of “ No end of a joke ”—intimated that he had not, but would rather wait till some of the girls came down.

“ No fun, don’t you know, having your feed alone, Mrs. Grant,” he said half-apologetically. “ I thought perhaps Vera—Miss Grace might be down.”

Mrs. Grant gave him a sharp glance.

“ You must not expect her down just yet. She and Sylvia talk half the night, so they

have to make up for it in the morning. Miss Grace is your partner to-day, isn't she?"

"Yes; and a thundering good partner, too, if you'll excuse the slang word" (and he never produced a sentence without one, truly!). "She promised to be down in good time this morning, so that we might get there early and have a practice on the courts. I am going to drive her over in the dogcart, you know."

"Oh, are you? Not with French Cat, I hope? She isn't safe, Frank."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Grant; she is really. The long drive yesterday will have taken all the tantrums out of her. By Jove!"

This exclamation was due to the appearance of Vera strolling slowly across the lawn in a becoming morning frock, accompanied by two dogs and Captain Dalton.

Frank Thorold bit his lip. The boy was really hit, and he was only nineteen—a manly boy, all ready to cast himself on an ocean of romance, although composed of the most British matter-of-factness. He had far too much reverence for Vera to suspect her of any impropriety, but at the same time he objected to seeing the gallant captain at her

side. It irritated him against his will or reason.

Opening the conservatory door, he walked over the grassy slope outside until he reached the smiling couple, almost before they saw him.

Vera held out her hand with a gracious look, although she did not want him just then. Captain Dalton had more influence over her already than she cared to own, even to herself.

“What cheer, comrade?” she asked her tennis partner, as she stooped to caress the collie hovering near her skirts. The dewy fresh air had given her a very slight colour, and the sun shone on her hair. Frank unconsciously acknowledged she was intoxicating, with that laughing warmth in her eyes and that little fluff of hair blown by a soft breeze across her temple.

“I’ve been down an age, waiting for you,” he said. “When shall you be ready?”

“Ready? What for? Oh, to drive! Not yet, I’m afraid, as I have not had my breakfast, and I shall have to get into my proper frame of clothes, don’t you know? When shall you be ready?”

“I am ready now, at any moment. Don’t you know how late it is? I thought you wanted to be there early.”

“So I do. Why did you tempt me to come out here, Captain Dalton?” She turned to the man at her side, who was tall and bronzed and dark, with the sort of look supposed to be attractive to women—a battered expression, as of having gone through hell-fire and out again. He suggested they should return at once and breakfast together, without answering her impossible question.

“No end of a joke,” after having walked by their side into the house, disappeared for a moment to give orders about the dogcart, and then her companion said—

“Are you really going to trust that boy to drive you over in the dogcart?”

“I certainly am. Why not?”

He gauged her face earnestly with a pair of powerful eyes.

“Why do you?” he asked.

“I—I shall like it. He’s a delightful boy, and I love a dogcart—one feels so free. Don’t you like to feel free?”

He laughed, a short little laugh.

“I might like it, but, as I am very far from

attaining freedom, I find it wiser to pretend I don't. What did you mean, Miss Grace?"

She scarcely knew why she felt a creeping colour in her face as she answered—

"Just what I said, and nothing more."

"Would you have gone with me in the dogcart, if I could have arranged it?" he asked.

"Oh no, certainly not. You must go in the carriage with Mrs. Dalton and your partner. You did not ask me to play with you, you see."

"Ask you, when that boy booked you at the very first suggestion of a Tournament! Had I a chance? I want to beg for a waltz or two to-night, if we dance, but expect I am too late—or have you one left?"

"Don't be absurd! Of course I have heaps of waltzes left unbooked."

"Then may I have two—three—four—half a dozen—or all you can spare from Mr. Frank Thorold and your other devotees?"

"If I am not too tired."

"And then we could sit out. I hope fervently I shall not be expected to dance much. My exhausted frame is unequal to double doses of tennis and waltzing."

“And I hope fervently”—began Vera, then broke off. One of the girls rushed up and embraced her.

“What do you hope fervently?” she asked, as they went into the breakfast-room.

“That Mrs. Smircher will appear this evening in that lovely red satin with the violet gar- nishing which she wore last night,” was the answer. “I was dreaming of it all last night, and it haunts my waking vision. I believe I can’t live without again tasting that exquisite confection.”

She was helping herself to a chair, and drawing her skirts aside for Dalton to seat himself beside her as she spoke, when Frank Thorold came in through the door opposite.

“It’s no end of a nuisance,” he said, taking the chair vacant on her other hand, “but Jervis says he must go with us. He thinks I am not used to French Cat, who is in swagger form, and will go like steam. But I hate a man behind listening to all you say; don’t you?”

“No, I like one. One wants a man to open gates and things. And besides, consider how our intellectual conversation ought to improve his mind. You should never neglect a chance

of influencing and developing the untrained mental powers of the lower orders, you know, Mr. Thorold."

She lowered her lashes that he might not see the laugh under them. Poor Frank! His intellectual faculties were indeed somewhat higher than those of a well-bred St. Bernard dog.

"Mental powers be— I don't want to offend you, Miss Grace, but of course you are laughing when you talk about our conversation being likely to improve anybody very much."

"Hadn't you better confine yourself to the first person singular, Thorold?" said Captain Dalton, with an amused smile. "You surely would not dare to insinuate that Miss Grace's converse could be aught than improving?"

Frank simply looked at him in disgust.

"Miss Grace understands what I mean if you don't," he said, with that confidence in her sympathy which she always contrived to gain.

The meal finally was over for those who began together, although others kept dropping in. Amongst the late comers was the "Bounder," justly indignant that he had not

come in time to breakfast with "The Grace," as he called Vera, to Frank's unmitigated disgust.

"That confounded fellow did not wake me till half-past nine! Tea, please" (to the servant). "I thought it was about six," he added, to explain the fact of his arrival down at half-past eleven.

While various suggestions were being made as to the best modes of awakening oneself in the morning, Vera slipped away to don a loose blouse and shady hat. To her Sylvia, on the stairs—

"Vera, it's not safe. Frank is such a random fellow, and the French Cat is horribly frisky. Don't go in the dogcart."

"My dear Syllie, you speak to a deaf ear. The gods have settled I am to go with 'No end of a joke,' and if I am killed, well, that will be the end of the joke. There's no more to be said. England expects every woman to be a coward, I know, but—"

"Go to destruction then, only don't say I didn't warn you."

"I will not, dear, I promise you. That is to say, my ghost shall not round on you; and if I am destroyed, I suppose I cannot reproach

you in the flesh. Do you think Flossie minds?"

"She would like to have gone with Frank, perhaps; but will be quite satisfied with the 'Boulder.' I expect you would enjoy it the more if you thought any one else would like to have been in your place."

"Too bad!" laughed Vera, wafting a spray of chalk powder over her face lightly (they had reached their room). "I am not so mean as you would make out, Sylvia. I like that little girl, she is so nice to me. I don't want her boy a bit. I do want to get him down in black and white, though; boys are so fascinating to draw. There is a sort of pearliness about them, delicious things! I must get Frank into '*Fractions*' somehow."

This was the title of a story she worked at by fits and starts.

The drive began well, and Vera felt in the highest of spirits. A sensibility to weather influence was one of her strongest characteristics, and the day was as fair as a June day can well be. The scent of conifers and honeysuckle combined made the air a feast; and the sparkle and purity everywhere enthralled

the senses. At every turn of the road, where they came across a fresh view of the landscape, she would feel a new swell of joy, and nothing disturbed her sensations of absolute exhilaration. The suspicion of fear, when French Cat indulged in antics of a diverting nature, lent another charm to the situation by exciting those strangely tense nerves of hers into a delicious stir of horror. She loved just enough danger to tingle her nerves.

But she had really no anxiety, being used to horses and driving herself; and therefore was more than astonished when French Cat, suddenly alarmed by a bird from the hedge when they least expected it, half sat down, then sprang forward, darted to one side, and finally flung out the three occupants of the dogcart upon the soft hedge-side turf.

Half-dazed, with a queer ache in one shoulder, Vera lay with closed eyes, wondering vaguely if she were very much mutilated, and whether the other two were killed: when arms were thrown round her, and she felt herself raised from the ground tenderly. "My darling, my darling, you are dead!" said a low voice; and before she had time to deny the

statement, a very warm kiss was pressed upon her lips.

She gave a struggle and exclaimed vehemently, "No, I'm not dead a bit! Please don't be foolish, Mr. Thorold. Oh, where's my hat?"

In the confusion of the moment both laughed, though Frank was feeling undeniably small. It makes you feel small to be contradicted by one you thought dead, especially when you have been taking liberties with the supposed remains.

By the time Vera had struggled to her feet, and was holding on with both hands to Frank's arm, the groom, who had slipped out, and therefore was unhurt, had caught the frightened French Cat, and was looking ruefully at the broken harness.

"You must forgive me," Frank was saying—he was rather bruised himself, and felt shaky. "It is all out now. I can't help it; but I really thought you were killed, and I couldn't bear it."

"Yes, it is all out, certainly—we are all out," cried Vera hysterically: "and there's a hat for a tennis tournament! Oh, you mustn't say any more, Mr. Thorold. We

must forget all this: it is nonsense, you know."

"It is not nonsense with me," said poor Frank, still holding her hand tightly. "Tell me you forgive me for taking that kiss, and that you'll give me a chance, and I shall be the happiest Johnny in the world. I really do love you no end."

Vera restrained an inclination to laugh and cry at once when she heard the inevitable "no end" drop in at the tail of the sentence.

"I do forgive you, certainly," she said rather tremulously; "but we can't discuss it here. I feel so shaky. What shall we do?"

The prospect certainly was not inviting; but before Frank could answer, there were indications of carriage wheels in the distance, and the problem was solved by the appearance of a carriage containing Captain and Mrs. Dalton, Sylvia, and the girl who was going to play with Captain Dalton in the tournament.

Their looks of consternation when they saw Vera and Frank on the road are not easily described. Sylvia was the first to jump out and clasp her friend in her arms.

“My darling Vera, are you hurt?” she inquired anxiously; and upon receiving a reply in the negative, she heard Dalton say, “Thank God!” under his moustache, so fervently that she was startled.

“I knew that idiot would upset you,” he said to Vera later, when they were ensconced in a tent at the tournament, trifling with a dainty little lunch. “Why would you not be advised by people who knew best?”

“Because ‘I like my own way, and I think it so nice,’” she replied half languidly. “I always do as I like, Captain Dalton, and I am always sorry for it afterwards. To-day, I am well punished, as I wanted to play awfully; but my shoulder aches, and I feel like a Chinese puzzle badly put together.”

It was quite true that her shoulder ached, and she thought it was quite true that she was punished; but, as a matter of fact, she was enjoying herself very much indeed. She was the heroine of the occasion, every one was concerned over her, and she had just that atmosphere of excitement and flattered vanity which her soul loved. She watched the play with something like a feeling of relief, that

she was not running about in the heat and getting her hair out of curl.

Between lunch and tea she had a delightful chat with "A priori" (whose name, by the way, was Noel Gordon), about the origin and development of consciousness in plants, to which Sylvia listened half in awe, as she did not understand bantering speculation upon improbabilities, and was only impressed by the cleverness of the ideas which coruscated through the mock-serious discussion.

Captain Dalton hung in the vicinity continually, with Frank, who had refused to play with any other partner. The latter was very quiet and slightly puzzled.

Was Vera flirting with Gordon, or only verily revelling in intellectual word-thrust? He was a young Englishman, with a young Englishman's simplicity, and Vera's conduct under certain circumstances had tried wiser heads than his in her day.

The mother of a hot and struggling girl on the courts, after watching Vera, and listening for some time to her singular and unmeditated *pseudo*-scientific jargon, turned to Sylvia and asked, in tones wherein curiosity strove with ill-concealed scorn—

“Who is the lady who gives her opinions so freely, and seems to have no reserves? Am I likely to know her?”

Sylvia drew aside impatiently. She would rather listen to Vera than discuss her.

“She is my friend, Miss Veronica Grace. You may possibly know her as the author of ‘*Nought but a Cipher*,’” she replied, with conscious pride.

“Indeed? I haven’t read the book, but I have heard of it. It was severely criticised, was it not?”

“It obtained a great sale,” was all Sylvia deigned to answer.

“Yes, of course. The critics are not always right. Now, a friend of mine wrote a book that was reviewed most highly, but the public would not read it: which shows how people may be disappointed in the effects of satisfactory criticism.”

“I don’t think Vera’s story was roughly handled, though,” said Sylvia, bound to stand up for this too slight creation of her friend’s. “It was not intended to be more than amusing, and in that it certainly succeeded. The reviewers only said it was not a literary work of art, and was faulty in construction. They

acknowledged there was talent in it, as every one must who has read it." She felt she had vindicated Vera's position as an author, and was beginning to wonder whether she could soon get some tea. The lady by her side had more to say and refused to release her.

"Mr. Gordon seems very much *épris*, does he not?" she went on. "I thought at first that Captain Dalton was the favoured individual, but the young lady seems to like a change."

Sylvia felt a curious little numbness pass over her. Was Mr. Gordon *épris*? she wondered vaguely, with a strangely personal wonder. Too simple-minded to analyse, she was puzzled by her own feelings.

"You are going to have some tea?" Captain Dalton was speaking to her on the other side, with his masterful eyes on her. She coloured, without the faintest idea that her own thoughts were painting her. He wondered, too, at the blush.

"Are you not glad that you are not playing deuce and vantage over there in the sun?" he asked, with his languid smile lifting the ends of his moustache. "This is better, isn't

it? although Miss Grace pretends to be dying to play."

"Vera does not pretend," said Sylvia gravely; "she really likes tennis, and she doesn't mind getting hot."

"But she is enjoying herself very much now, don't you think? I hardly dared to interrupt with anything so mundane as tea. She is quite lost to the world."

Sylvia looked across the grass to where her friend was lifting an animated chin to the earnest gaze of Noel Gordon, and felt the queerness of a faint shock again.

"They are very interested," she said. "Mr. Gordon likes to argue with some one worthy of his steel."

The coldness in her tone struck Dalton, who was by no means void of tact or perception. He laughed lightly.

"And they would never agree, those two disputants. You had better part them before they come to blows, I think, Miss Sylvia," he said.

"There is no fear of *that*, I should say," put in the lady who had spoken before. "They seem far too much absorbed in each other to quarrel."

I—I dare not even think what I want, or the name of him I— Why can I win anything another woman would prize, but not the one prize I care about? It is not because I don't deserve it, because the undeserving are generally the most fortunate. How I wish I could say, I am quite true to myself! Oh for strength! I shall lose my Sylvia, and get old with no companion, but only a regret to look back upon. Better be wholly bad than this half-goodness, which makes of me a pale negative. I was born and educated for a bad woman—why disappoint the devil when I am not able to be good enough to satisfy myself? Ah! it is lucky there is no temptation at hand just now!" She set her strong white teeth and laughed aloud, at the same moment that a shadow fell across her from behind.

CHAPTER III.

"In a globe of film, all vapourish,
Swam full-faced, like a silly silver fish."

ROSSETTI.

THE moonlight was partly answerable for the soft tone in which she answered Captain Dalton's remark, "Is it really you, Miss Grace, out in the garden alone, with a joke all to yourself?" (for he had caught her laugh).

She looked at him with pretty parted lips and a beam of welcome. Her heart had started violently for a moment, and a curious feeling of superstition had crept over her. It was as if her words had invoked the evil temptation she had laughed over as distant.

"I can hardly believe my luck," he went on, "to find you alone here when I was contemplating only the society of my cigar" (which he flung away as he spoke); "but now you will let me take a turn with you, will you not?"

“No, I think not,” said Vera, in haste to form a good resolution. “I must go in, or Sylvia will be finding out I am not in my room, and then”— She halted.

“But you cannot be so flint-hearted as to go now that I have found you. Indeed I will not have you—I cannot let you leave me.”

He spoke in tones so unlike his usual drawl, that Vera was thrilled with the nerve-sensation she loved—a mixture of danger-consciousness and romance, which a suspicion of passion in a man always roused in her.

“Captain Dalton,” she said, in good imitation of the haughty virtue of a novel-heroine, “you must please not talk like that. You forget yourself.”

The speech pleased her very much, and she felt so nice and good that she almost acted up to the occasion. Dalton was not deceived. Like most men, he read a woman more by instinct than reasoning. She was very charming, and out here, under silver light, in a soft cloak of shimmering blue, she appeared lovely enough to turn a man’s head—especially a man who had been drinking several glasses of very good port after a satisfactory dinner.

So he did not give way an inch, although feigning humility.

“You *must* forgive me,” he said. “I did not mean to speak so abruptly. As you say, I forgot myself, but perhaps not without excuse. You are excuse enough for any man’s delirium. There is dew on this grass ; do not let us stop here to argue the question, but come over into the avenue, where your feet will not get wet.”

“You are very thoughtful.” Vera laughed a little, but not quite naturally. She was inwardly struggling, though she knew quite well which side of herself would conquer. “But really, Captain Dalton, I must not stay here.” She let him slip his arm through hers, all the same. “I only came out for a breath of air, and I felt so restless.”

“No wonder ; you have had a most trying day. I hope you will not be the worse for it to-morrow. The dancing has been deferred in your honour. I believe we all felt that a waltz without you would be Dead Sea fruit.”

“How absurd ! Why do you say such insane things ? You mean every one is tired to-night. Do be straight ! I like directness in a man.”

“Do you? But there are some cases in which a man dare not be direct, Miss Vera.”

“Are there? I think not. I don’t acknowledge them.” (Was she speaking the truth or not? For the very life of her she couldn’t tell.)

“You believe it best to go right to the root of things. You think a man ought to say ‘I love you’ to the woman who has inflamed him, whether”—

She thought his words, and his gaze were becoming too direct; his arm was trembling, too, so she stopped him.

“I was not thinking of anything of *that* kind. There are exceptions in every case.”

“And you said you acknowledged no exceptions?”

“But then a woman can’t be quite consistent always, can she?”

Laughing eyes were raised to his, where there ought to have been scorn and anger, let us say. The owner of the eyes knew this, but the moon-power had carried her too far, and the strong arm in hers was drawing out her strength surely, surely.

The look was enough for the man’s already fermented brain.

“Vera !” he exclaimed passionately ; “listen—you must hear me. I am not going to have you play the fool with me, as you do with those boys in the house. Don’t you know you have a man to deal with, my dear little girl, and one who knows his way about? I am not to be trifled with by all this show of prudishness. I know you mean me to make love to you, and I mean to do as I like ; that is, I mean you to give me something in return for my devotion. It is not going to be only play”— He stopped, and tried to put his arm round her, but this she repulsed with determination, and he found he had not yet sapped all her strength.

She looked straight into the handsome eyes, in spite of the burning brutality in them, with real anger in her gaze, feeling instinctively it was quite beautiful to be playing such a heroic part.

“Captain Dalton,” she said in a very low, intense voice, “you are a worse man than I believed you to be. What do you mean by this? I thought we were to be friends—stop—I mean real friends, not this kind of thing. I have not been trying to play with you or any one else. How dare you say so! My whole

life is bound up in my work—my writing” (she thought this was true just now), “and all men have only an outside interest for me. Do you think I am going to submit to be called”—She paused.

“A dear little girl,” he finished the sentence. “I will call you a bewitching woman, or a fair enchantress, or a goddess incarnate, or anything whatever you please, so that you answer to it. Only, I will have you, darling!”

Vera stamped.

“Silence!” she demanded.

There was silence for a few minutes, whilst he looked at her, slightly puzzled to know whether she were really angry or no.

Suddenly she gave a great sigh and drooped a little. This time there was no acting. With most women of acute nerve-organization, she was liable to physical collapse of power, and the events of the day had been telling upon her. She staggered towards one of the trees in the avenue, and leant against the trunk panting. He was alarmed as he hurried towards her; but Vera was not a fainting subject.

“I feel so queer,” she said, with a gasping little laugh, “but it will go off directly. Don’t be afraid, I shan’t faint—I never have done.”

She put one hand to her throat to loosen the collar, and drew a long breath. Then she laid the other on his arm and leant upon it, looking white and pathetic in the shadow.

“It is my fault,” he protested ruefully, the best of him coming to the surface, as it will to any man worth his manhood, at the sight of a woman’s distress. “It is my confounded violence and insolence. Will you forgive me, though I cannot forgive myself? I did not mean to frighten you. I was carried away. You know I would rather die than hurt a hair of your head.” His force of accent made the words sound quite true and almost original.

But it had come that Vera was in no mood to complain of lack of originality in her lover. She had idealised herself and him into another world, where passion was the only fixed law of action. For with the sudden failure of her muscles, all her reasoning and mental or moral strength gave out. She had become a pencil-drawing of herself, all the true colour of her individuality had faded away, and she was as much a shade as the outline of the beech at her feet. Leaning her head against Dalton’s shoulder, she said faintly and sweetly—

“I know, I believe you do care for me too

much to hurt me ; but I am afraid of you all the same, when you look so fierce and talk so wildly." She could feel his breath, which was coming rather fast, as she spoke. "You don't understand me a little bit, Captain Dalton ; neither do I understand myself ; but I know this is all wrong, and so do you—very wrong, and wicked, and horrible ! It must be the last time"—

He interrupted her.

"Not the last—you cannot doom me like that. It may be wrong, but we are not the only pair in the world who have found out too late that there is no life apart. And what sense is there in blinking facts ? Matters have gone too far, I tell you, Vera."

A faint misty figure was rising behind Vera's consciousness, like a wet moon from a cloud. It was the apparition of Garrick Maitland, the man whom she had supposed she loved with the whole of herself. But then, after all, had she not been only walking in a dream till now ? The present is the true, all else is illusionary ; the touch of Captain Dalton's arm was very real. The strength of his manhood was a spell over her, a baneful one, blotting out all such luminous

ghosts as Garrick, who had certainly never made love to her like this. Why throw the actual away for a delusion, when the former is within her grasp? Her whole nature was distorted now. It was life to feel that strong arm round her, and living breath upon her temples. Was not sin sweet? Did any one ever resist it with a heart of wax against the melting heat of passion? Ah! she checked her thoughts with a quick breath, and pushed herself from her companion into the moonlight on the gravelled road again. For a moment the last shred of will in her kept him at bay, then his eyes subdued her, and she drifted. She lifted her face in the white light as his arms closed round her—and then—there came a cry from somewhere, as their lips met.

As by a flash of deadly lightning she stood face to face with herself, when, turning, they both saw figures at a few yards' distance. These seemed only the figments in a dream as yet, when one—all pale in womanly outline—threw up arms and fell full length on the turf beside the very tree against which Vera had been leaning a few minutes ago. Her companion knelt down over her with a suppressed exclamation. Dalton and Vera

hurried forward with an impulse between them.

Mrs. Dalton lay on the grass unconscious, and Frank Thorold was bending over her, trying to lift her helpless head. Vera flung herself on her knees with a spasm at her throat, when Frank repelled her impetuously.

“Not you !” he said hoarsely ; “you have no right to touch her ! Let her husband come.”

In looking back afterwards, Vera always felt that, at that moment, she touched supreme degradation, and knew it. Nothing could ever burn her again as the scorn and disgust in her boy-lover’s voice scorched her. His action was rough, almost brutal ; she felt the loss of every atom of respect in it, and with the petulance of a spoilt child she was inclined to cry, “What have I done ? I did not know ; it seemed so little ; I could not help it.” But at the back of it all there was another consciousness—that she could have helped it ; that she did not try ; that she had dragged all her good gifts and best parts in the mud willingly.

It was horrible now that the glamour and excitement had gone out of it all. She walked

back to the house and to her room like an automaton, scarcely feeling her limbs, only acknowledging an aching spirit.

She went straight to the long looking-glass in order to assure herself that she was the same woman who had gone out, and stood before it perfectly motionless.

Somehow her very thought had become paralysed. She was so confused in her mind that it had become blank of ideas. All she could say, over and over to herself, was, "So that is you, Vera—that is you. I know you now well—too well." The contemptuous tone of the young man she had called "No end of a joke" had been a veritable mirror to her conscience. She saw herself without the kindly halo of self-excuse; and the woman in the cheval-glass opposite, under a full glare of gaslight, stood out no more clearly than that inner Vera who faced her, naked and ashamed. She did not smite her forehead and abase herself to the ground, because, at the bottom of her sensation, there was a curious desire to fathom this mystery of her nature, and analyse closely the demoniacal possession that had seemed to master her. She looked at herself as if she were under a microscope, inquisi-

tively, with a puzzled longing to account for the struggle that had taken place within her. As she stood there, still half alive only to realities, staring at the pale reflection before her, whose large, black-fringed eyes fascinated her like those of some evil ophidian, and whose set features seemed cut upon the glass by her immovability, some one entered the room behind her with a swift rustle of skirts, and, starting sharply, she saw Sylvia.

A transformed Sylvia, all vivid with a new expression, which caused a fresh fear to leap through Vera's frame before she had time to classify it. In a few seconds of wit-collection she knew that it was not anger, nor disgust, nor reproach which dawned on Sylvia's face, as she approached her swiftly, and, before she had time to stop her, threw both arms round her neck.

"Vera *mia*," said the girl softly, "I have something to tell you—so strange! I think you will be glad, for I feel so curiously happy. I suppose it is the best thing in the world that has happened to me."

"Yes." Vera spoke mechanically, with little response to the caressing touch. "What is it, Sylvia? Can I guess?"

“You might,” Sylvia laughed gleefully. “It is not the most extraordinary thing in the world perhaps, though I never thought Mr. Gordon”—

“‘A priori!’” ejaculated Vera, with a crude laugh, she didn’t know why.

“Yes; ‘A priori,’ Vera, if you like to call him so. He loves me, Vera, actually me!”

“That is nothing!” With the same harsh laugh Vera pushed her friend from her, and looked at her with curving lips. “That is nothing; for Captain Dalton loves me!” The reckless words were no sooner said than a choking wave of pain and self-degradation drowned her eyes and throat in a great sob.

“Sylvia, Sylvia, leave me!” she cried. “I am not fit company for you, dear Sylvia.”

Her friend was struck with such perfect amazement that she was absolutely speechless for a moment. Then her own happiness flooded her in charity and passionate ruth, for it was impossible not to see how Vera was suffering.

Once more her arms were round Vera’s neck.

“Don’t talk like that, dear,” she said; “I am not going to believe you when you say such

things about yourself. Friends do not desert each other for a slight matter."

"But this is not a slight matter," Vera said, as soon as she could speak. "It means that, while you are the happiest woman in the world, I am the most miserable; for I have fallen off my pedestal and below my standard when I ought to have been most strong. Sylvia, why was I born with this horrible predisposition to something—I don't know what? Why could not some good strong man have rescued me when I was your age, before I could be preyed on by all the evil growths that spring upon full womanhood. Why were all my worst proclivities fostered in my girlhood, instead of my best, so that now I am weak—weak against the lowest temptations. I wish I had never been born—from my heart I do!"

"But you must not wish that," Sylvia gently soothed her. "You are of use in the world, and you are going to be of greater use yet. Why do you give way like this, Vera? And tell me what you meant about Captain Dalton just now."

"I was quite serious, Sylvia. I have been letting Captain Dalton make love to me, and I am not a fit person to be your friend."

“Don’t talk nonsense, but tell me all about it,” said sympathetic Sylvia of the brown eyes, crushing back the thoughts of her own love-affair, which threatened to overcrowd her. “Sit down here by me, and let me hear the worst that has happened. You are not going to escape me, and I shall tell you just what I think. Do you suppose anybody ever went through the world without yielding to some temptation or other? After all, what virtue is there in being good because you have never been tried?”

“There is no virtue in failing,” said Vera sadly; “and, Sylvia, there are some temptations I never resisted in my life. This is one. If I were out in the moonlight with Captain Dalton again”—

“Well?” asked Sylvia.

“I should let him make a fool and a coward of me again,” continued Vera.

“It is because you like to be made a fool and coward of, then,” said Sylvia; “for your will is strong enough when you like to exert it.”

“I think you are right; there is such a pleasure in feeling oneself a weak woman—such a curious attraction—such a sweet-

ness!" Sylvia's eyes opened wider and wider.

"You are getting away from me, Vera," she said; "I cannot follow you now. What possible pleasure there can be in feeling small and weak passes my comprehension."

"That is because you have never felt large and strong, perhaps, with the consciousness of independence. But you don't know yourself, Sylvia. Honestly, now, does it give you no pleasure to confess an inferiority to 'A priori'?"

"Of course it does. I love him!"

"Then I suppose I love man collectively, for I like to feel his power over me. There is no hope for me, darling; you will have to give me up."

But Sylvia was lost in thought, and a smile was curving her lips. Happy Sylvia!

CHAPTER IV.

“For such a sunken soul what room in Heaven?
For such a soaring soul what place in Hell?
Can these desires be damned, these doings shriven?”

NOBLE.

It was a very difficult thing for Vera to face the household after that night, the end of which she and Sylvia had spent in serious conversation, until dawn coloured the curtains. That Sylvia had been justly down upon her, she confessed; indeed, she had expected nothing else, and loved her friend the more that she severely censured her conduct.

Sylvia's happiness was somewhat dashed by this disappointment. She wanted her friend to be the character she had made of her to herself, and it was a blow to find that she was of that very ordinary material from which are made our frail women. All the same, she had no idea of letting Vera go, and saving herself from the contamination of a weaker spirit. She had

never felt herself "large" or "strong," it is true, because she had never thought much about herself at all; but now she knew she possessed elements of nobility and strength in her character sufficient to stop a gap where a flood might break in. That Vera was powerful in her brilliancy of mental calibre and her talents, in her ability to carry through all she attempted, even with insufficient means at her disposal, she knew; but that she was strong where Vera was weak, she also knew. Therefore, without hesitation, she elected to lend all her support to Vera. Perhaps she was stronger even than she recognised in putting by her girlish elation over her own new love-story—the very first romance that had come into her life—in order to study the aspect of Vera's position.

She awoke next morning with two impressions upon her mind: That she must be prepared to face the commonplaces likely to be offered over her engagement, and the reproaches possible to her friend, with equal calmness. Vera pleaded headache, and did not go down to breakfast.

The first to join Sylvia, who was sipping coffee with a disinclination for food which be-

trays mental disquietude or emotional excitement, was, of course, Gordon. What he said need not be chronicled, but a noticeable degree of primness distinguished Sylvia, that she declined to be lured into the warm sunlight out of doors by him, until she had seen most of the guests downstairs.

“I am so sorry about Mrs. Dalton,” were almost the first words Mrs. Grant said when she came in from watering her plants, to find a large party of consumers seated round the table. Sylvia felt her heart stop for a moment, as one of the girls, who was laughing and talking with the “Boulder,” asked—

“What is the matter? Is Mrs. Dalton unwell?”

Every one stopped talking to hear the answer.

“Yes, she is very unwell. It appears that, feeling rather faint, she went into the garden last night, and there lost consciousness altogether. Luckily Captain Dalton was on the spot, and he carried her in to her room. I did not know anything about it until this morning. You can tell us more particulars, Frank,” turning to the lad, who had finished breakfast, and was pretending to look at a

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paper. His face flushed scarlet as she went on, "You were with Mrs. Dalton when she fainted, were you not?"

By some strange instinct his eyes met those of Sylvia, and he felt in her steady gaze an agony of entreaty.

"Yes, I was there," he said, as indifferently as possible. "Mrs. Dalton thought she would like to go out, as she found the room hot; but we had not gone far when she stumbled and fell. Captain Dalton was smoking out there, I expect, and he came to my assistance, so that together we brought her round a bit, and got her indoors. I hope she's better."

Sylvia gave a long silent sigh of relief. Her friend was safe. And before the conversation had progressed farther, Captain Dalton himself came into the room and sought Mrs. Grant.

"You will forgive us for running away," he said; "but my wife is anxious to get home, as she doesn't feel in very excellent form, and she does not wish to be a care on your hands. You know she is very delicate, and just now"—At his pause Mrs. Grant protested.

“Oh, I am so sorry! I must go and talk to Marian; she must not leave me like this, and I am sure she is not fit to travel.” With this she bustled out of the room, leaving Dalton a prey to solicitous inquiries.

Sylvia dared not look at him. He was too utterly hateful in her eyes. She dreaded lest he should see in her face what she was thinking of him. There was suppressed excitement in the air, which all felt without understanding.

Then some unfortunate person inquired—

“And is Miss Grace ill too? Where is she this morning?” which was followed by a moment of dead silence before Sylvia answered—

“She has a headache” (oh, what would women do without that everlasting headache?), “and has not slept very well, so I persuaded her not to get up yet.”

“She probably feels the after-effects of her spill,” Dalton said, speaking with a greater drawl than ever.

A curious feeling came over Sylvia for a few seconds. She fancied, in a sort of trance, that she got up, faced him, and said, “You liar!” in a loud voice; then sat down again. For a few moments the fancy was so real that

she was bathed in confusion. But then she knew it had been a chimera, and that all that had really happened was a murmur of assent from those around, who agreed that a trap-accident sufficed to account for Miss Grace's indisposition.

Again Sylvia's eyes met Frank Thorold's. He rose with a beckoning look, and went out of the French window into the rose garden, whither Sylvia presently followed him.

"That takes the cake, I think," remarked the boy Vera called the "Bounder" to the pretty girl by his side. "If I were Gordon, I wouldn't stand having my mash taken off like that, don't you know."

"What do you mean, Mr. Forsyth?" asked the girl, with a laugh. "Do speak English."

"Oh, come now, Miss Lily, you understand, so don't pretend to be so sappy. What do you think about Mrs. Dalton and Miss Grace now? Is the good lady waxy, do you suppose? and has she been tearing down the lovely Veronica's back hair? The captain's a bit of a bounder, isn't he? and he's been coming it a little too strong lately. I don't wonder at Mrs. Dalton doing a faint, just to bring

him round a bit. What? Suppose we go out in the garden and see what Frank and Sylvia are up to."

Frank and Sylvia were walking close to a quaintly cut box hedge in earnest confabulation. Gordon, who was watching them from the window, thought he had never seen his serious little Sylvia look more serious, and nearly cracked his head wondering what it was all about. To be jealous of Sylvia, now that she had confessed her love for him, was a flat absurdity, but he did not much care to see her lay her hand on Frank's arm with that touching expression of confidence.

The first words Frank had said when she joined him were—

"Sylvia, do you know anything about last night?"

"Yes, I do," she answered instantly; "and I am so very grateful to you, Frank, for saying nothing about Vera this morning."

He threw back his head with an uncertain sound.

"What could I say? It is no concern of mine if Miss Grace likes to let herself down and shame herself and you. For your sake, of course, I wouldn't help scandal; but

I'm jolly disgusted all the same, I can tell you."

"Yes, I know. But you must try and think the best of her, Frank. Captain Dalton is very fascinating to some girls—and"—

"Sylvia!" he stopped her short and turned round to look at her. "Is it you talking like that? Making excuses for a woman years older than yourself, who ought to know better! Shall I tell you what Vera Grace is? She's a fast, deceitful, thundering bad lot! and not fit to be your friend. You ought to turn her out of the house. Why, I saw her myself with"—

Sylvia interrupted him quickly.

"I don't want to know what you saw," she said; "and you must not speak thus of my friend. You are mistaken in her character. And even if you were not, I should stand by her always, because I love her."

Her words awoke an echo from him, and, as if unable to prevent himself, he burst out—

"And so do I, Sylvia: worse luck!"

She stared at him, and then broke into a short laugh.

"See the difference between a man's love

and a woman's," she said : "you love her, and can say nothing bad enough about her."

He was silent, and his face fell again. Such a jolly, healthy, boyish face on his six feet of manhood.

Then Sylvia laid her little hand on his arm, and spoke to him more gently.

"We both love Vera, therefore we must both be her true friends, and try to help her to do what is right. You don't know how miserable she is, Frank."

He bent his head lower.

"She has made a fool of me," he said, carrying his hurt vanity carefully. "She laughed at me, and then takes that brute's kisses" (with emphasis). "I thought she was an angel almost" (with a laugh), "and now I feel as if I hate and despise her when I think of what she has done. You cannot understand, Sylvia. You are too innocent, and your feelings are not wounded as mine have been. You can't know how a man feels when he sees the woman he loves handled by a *beast* like that Dalton."

He was not twenty, certainly, but he was a man now, and Sylvia did not dream of smiling at his words. This small crisis (was it small?)

in his life had stamped out the boyhood, and he spoke like a manly man, eloquently, and without his habitual slanginess. How curious it is that we should be most correct in our phraseology when we let ourselves really go in a moment of great excitement!

"I do know—I can guess," Sylvia said: "but you must not think, Frank, that Vera has made a fool of you. In her heart she likes you and honours you a thousand times more than that man who"—

She broke off.

"Then why the deuce— Excuse me, Sylvia"—

There was no time for more, as the "Bounder" and Lily girl came up at the moment.

"We beg to challenge you to a game of tennis," said the former; "so look sharp and get your shoes, and that swagger hat of yours with the big brim, Sylvia, so that we can all get under it when we're hot. Don't back out. You must amuse your guests, and I'm one of 'em. Hurry up!"

But Sylvia saw a pair of deep eyes, shaded by disfiguring glasses, gazing wistfully at her from the window, where lounged a tall

slight figure in a grey suit, smoking plaintively.

So she answered, with the brightest of smiles and blushes—

“But you’re not my *only* guest, Lionel, and as I’m just engaged to Mr. Gordon, I think, if you don’t mind, I would rather go and talk to him than play tennis.”

These words were uttered on her way to the window, so she did not hear the whistle to which both the boys simultaneously gave vent.

Then, “Gordon’s a lucky fellow,” said Frank, and disappeared in deep dejection. He had been devoted to Sylvia ever since his short-coat days, and had never swerved from his allegiance, not even for Vera. Only with Sylvia he had always felt so young, and with Vera so very much more of a man. She had the art of drawing people out, and loved boys for their frank adoration.

Later on, when the carriage was at the door to take the Daltons to the station, Sylvia was not to be found.

“Where *is* the child?” asked Mrs. Grant anxiously; “does nobody know?”

Then one of the girls said—

“I think you’ll find her at the far end of the paddock with Mr. Gordon, Mrs. Grant. She went away about an hour ago.” Every one laughed. The carriage had disappeared through the lodge gates with the Daltons, and the friends who had assembled on the doorstep to say good-bye had been made aware of the state of affairs by the girl called Lily.

It was obvious that Mr. Gordon had not obtained the parental sanction yet.

Half-vexed and half-puzzled, Mrs. Grant turned towards the paddock. “I must go and find them,” she said.

Sylvia, seated on a horse-trough of ancient build, looking up at her lover, who leant against a tree, saw Mrs. Grant, fair, warm, and serious, coming towards her, and ran to meet that dear person. The clover blossoms hardly felt her feet, that danced over them so lightly.

“Mother, dear, we were just coming to look for you,” she said ; then drooped eyelids and waited for him to speak.

“Mrs. Grant, I have such a heavy favour to ask of you and Mr. Grant that I am almost afraid,” he faltered. Even the brilliant and self-possessed “A priori,” the eloquent lec-

turer and profound logician, faltered, and looked to Mrs. Grant to help him out. She glanced at him for a moment, and then laughed tremulously.

“I am not going to answer. You must ask your favour of Mr. Grant. Sylvia must talk to me. You know she is vowed to Somerville.”

Sylvia laughed, and he laughed. Somerville seemed very far away just then. They all three walked back to the house together. Vera, coming downstairs, paused on a landing to see through an open window the three loving, happy, faces, iridescent with the light that can only mean one thing. A quick spasm of feeling drew her hand to her side, where she probably fancied dwelt her heart.

“Oh, how happy, how horribly happy they are!” she thought, in a sudden agony of self-pity. “Why should it never have come to me like that? Can it ever come? And what is all the rest of the world worth without it—Garry?”

The name in her thoughts caused her to turn hot and tremble. “And I don’t deserve it,” she continued to herself; “that is true. I don’t want what I don’t deserve, what I have

not earned. Let me only be strong, and make my life valuable, not worthless. Ah, Mrs. Marsden! I did not see you. I'm better, thanks very many. It is only my head. I suffer a good deal from it sometimes. Nerves, I expect: only it's weak and effeminate to have nerves in these advanced days."

She wore a clean white gown of flimsy softness, and her face was coloured by recent thoughts. Her dark eyes glowed softly, and she was soon plunged into warm and earnest conversation with the lady in question, who was in distress over a letter she had just received from home, saying her little girl was ill.

"Whatever faults Miss Grace may have, she is a kind and sympathetic creature," that lady was heard to say afterwards. "Do you know, she actually offered to go straight off to London and nurse Gladys when I told her I did not quite trust my governess; and I believe she meant it too."

Vera had meant it. For the time she even longed for Mrs. Marsden to accept her offer. To nurse a sick child would have done her sorry conscience good.

CHAPTER V.

“Plays such fantastic tricks before high Heaven
As make the angels weep.”—SHAKESPEARE.

THE luncheon sun had begun pouring its heat-rays down upon two very hot and moist young men. Frank Thorold and Lionel Forsyth, who had been playing single sets for the last hour or so, sought relief from the fiery blessing under an elm skirting the courts, which ran alongside of the short avenue leading to the lodge. From the mound of raised grass under the dining-rooms, which formed a sloping terrace, came the sound of voices in high and low keys, with often a ringing laugh; for there sat Vera with a little court, as was her wont.

“Miss Grace seems to have got over her fright,” said the “Boulder,” wiping his brows, and taking in a long breath; “she is as lively as ever, and sending Mr. Grant into fits, as usual. What jolly good fun she is!”

“Do you think so?”

Frank's mouth set very hard as he said this with studied indifference.

“Do I think so? By Jove! What do *you* think?”

To this was returned no answer.

“I thought I should have died,” he went on, not stopping to notice Frank's silence, “when she informed Mrs. Montague Cocklebox yesterday that it was necessary to write rubbish if you wanted to please the aristocracy; that all the culture was being monopolised by the middle classes, and that the ‘upper ten’ would soon have nothing left to boast of but high noses and big feet. It was too jolly lovely for anything, and knocked spots out of the old lady, whose daughters have the largest feet and noses in Great Britain and Ireland!”

“Miss Grace is not generally so rude as to remark upon people's infirmities,” said Frank sententiously.

The “Bounder” stared at him, and took out a cigarette-case.

“Wonder how long it is to lunch time! Got a watch? No. Have a cigarette, then. Tell you what, old chappy, you're

fagged, ain't you? Shall we go and get a drink?"

Frank intimated more cheerfully that he thought he would wait till lunch.

"My private opinion is, you're really mashed on the fair Veronica, downright gone—blue-mouldy," said Lionel, after struggling with a match, and getting a few consoling whiffs in return.

"Think so?"

"I do indeed, old Johnny; and you needn't be so beastly grumpy over it. Any one can see she's nuts on you, and now Dalton's gone, you'll be able to make all the running. What a bally bounder that fellow is!" with vivid recollections of having been alluded to as "that Forsyth boy" by the handsome soldier.

"Bah!" Frank threw away his cigarette before the ash had found time to whiten.

"You think you're very clever, my dear boy, but you might give me credit for more sense than to fall in love with my grandmother."

"Great Scot! The Grace your grandmother! Who'd have thought it! How awfully well-preserved, and how naughty of her to be a grandmother! What rot, Frank!

She's young enough for any fellow to flirt with. And what do a few years matter? They ripen a woman and make her charming. I hate your bread-and-butter school girls."

"Too charming for me!" said Frank, with a snort.

"Ah, I thought so. You've proposed to her, and she's refused you. Is there any chance for a Johnny?"

Frank laughed.

"You'd better try, my dear chappy. You're older than I am by a few months, and perhaps she might prefer an attic with you to a cellar with me. We are both extremely eligible. I am likely to be at Sandhurst for another five years, and you at Cambridge for another two. By the time Miss Grace is fifty, if she will wait for one of us, we might fight a duel to see which is to have her, and the survivor carry off the young and blushing prize!"

Even while he spoke, Frank felt ashamed of himself. He hated to talk over Vera, but the subject fascinated him, and he talked against himself.

"How eloquent we are when we're in love!" sighed Forsyth. "Now I couldn't make a speech like that to save my life! It

sounded as if fresh from the lips of the Grace herself. What did you think of Turnip-tops being scratched ? ”

“ Beastly shame ! I knew there was going to be some hanky-panky. Stubbs told me it was in the air. Precious few things Stubbs don’t find out. A lot of fellows at our place were let in.”

“ I just squeaked out by luck, or I might have dropped in pretty stiffish. Do you find any difficulty with your governor over oof ? Mine’s a caution. He thinks I’m headlong for perdition if I ask for an extra fiver. You know what it is. A fellow can’t be for ever sweating over books, unless he’s a mug ; and there’s always something on for a Johnny who knows his way about.”

The conversation after this became more and more technical.

Vera was looking very seriously at a line of dark firs behind the elms and beeches.

“ If it’s really a question of survival of the fittest,” she said to Mr. Grant, who stood by the window-frame watching her with an amused smile (he always felt her to be one delightful joke), “ I should think the Radical must come up head first. Progress, that ‘re-

current curve,' as some one calls it, seems to make its onward swoops with larger and quicker waves every century, as indeed it must do ; and soon change will be so rapid that we shall not have time for one glance round before, hey presto ! we are dead. Indeed, it appears like that to some of us now. Well, then, the man who can change fastest and develop new ideas the most rapidly, who is neck-and-neck with evolution, so to speak, must come in first in the race, and leave the good old solid Conservative far in the rear ! ”

Mr. Ford Grant was a “good old solid Conservative,” and he caught the sly smile from her lips with perfect enjoyment.

“Then the man who can change his coat quickest is destined to be the conqueror of the future ? ” he said.

“Why, who can doubt it ? Even now prevarication and vacillation have become one of the fine arts for a statesman to study. ‘The honourable member is misinformed. I did not say the honourable gentleman was a liar ; I merely said that in the course of the honourable member’s career he had been frequently known to make inaccurate statements, which had always been proved to be wilfully false.’ ”

She imitated the raised tones of an imaginary politician speaking to his constituents, and continued: “ ‘And although it be true that I helped to throw out the Bill for the Collaring and Christening of Lost Dogs, yet I am not ashamed to say that, since this time last month, I have recanted my error; and now, gentlemen, you may count upon my vote for every measure in which the Collaring and Christening of dear distressful Dogdom is concerned.’ ” This mock speech raised a laugh all round, in response more to her manner and expression than to the actual nonsense itself.

“You can never be serious for very long, Miss Grace, can you?” asked one lady, who slightly suspected her, and who thought young women, by all proper canons, should not talk so much and so vivaciously before the other sex. It was bad form.

“Serious! am I not stating incontrovertible facts of natural history? Who is the man that rules his fellows? The one who adopts most completely and rapidly the very latest notion that has floated like a feather from the Seraphim upon our whirling planet. I believe I am right, and the Seraphim simile represents the

intellect of the Upper World. Where is Mr. Gordon? Oh, I forgot! of course he is otherwise engaged. What is it we all love most, and that is most interesting to us? Something novel, something apparently fresh! We are absorbed directly, and not ready to grasp it at once."

"Unless our good old Tory principles forbid," struck in Mr. Grant.

"The unfortunate see in novelty a chance of amelioration, and grasp it at once; the fortunate like the new sensation for the excitement it affords. Therefore, the ardent and impressionable Radical leads the running. He scents game ahead, and the rest follow. The game may turn out to be a withered leaf flying before the wind, or a cloud shadow—what matter? By the time the good old Conservative comes puffing up, the whole pack is refreshed and ready to start again after another chimera. What the populace likes is something to run after."

"And suppose, in running after the shadow, they have lost the substance, neglected useful and necessary measures, and ruined the country?"

"Then Russia must step in."

“Russia! why Russia? The most to be avoided of all arbitrators, most men think.”

“Most men make mistakes” (laughing). “No, of course not” (to a mild suggestion that women never did). “Russia would step in and plunge us into a sanguinary war, from which we should emerge triumphantly, all one party—the English party; no more Whigs and Tories. We should find out our mistakes and our intrinsic grandeur. Then to build up again one harmonious whole.”

“How about the waste of life?”

“Ah! that you might lay on the Radical, if it would be any consolation. But your real true Radical would scorn to be affected by any such argument. He is too scientific, and metaphysical at the same time, not to be ready with any quantity of polemical sophistry. ‘All life,’ he would say”—

But what the real true Radical was likely to say in this predicament was destined to be lost to posterity, as a maid came out with a note and handed it to the animated speaker.

Vera suspected, when she had time to think it over, that there must have been malice or mischief at the bottom of this action; for the girl said, as she handed the

missive to Vera, in tones aggressively loud enough to be heard by all present—

“If you please, miss, Captain Dalton asked me to give you this, before he went away, and I forgot it till just this minute.”

If one of the chimneys of the house had fallen upon her at this minute, Vera could scarcely have been more wholly taken aback.

She felt a curious hot tingling all over her surface, as if the blood were trying to get through the skin. Absolutely struck dumb with dismay and shame, she had scarcely presence of mind not to take the note and fly with all possible haste from the scene. There was a silence of a most awkward kind, and in Mrs. Grant's ejaculation—“Captain Dalton!”—Vera recognised all the displeasure and birth of distrust she most desired to avoid. Sylvia's mother had never belonged to that section of “smart” society which connives at, and merely finds food for gossip in, doubtful behaviour. Neither she nor Mr. Grant had ever cared to cultivate the society of people who were reputed to be the least trifle fast. There could not have existed a more innocent matron of forty-five than kindly Mrs. Grant, yet instinc-

tively she caught the scent of something uncongenial here, and Vera knew it without daring to look at her. Her heart ached to think how it would annoy her good friend to feel that suspicion of one of her guests was justified to the rest; and she knew that the unspoken thought of every one present would naturally be "Why should Captain Dalton write to Miss Grace?" And why, indeed? She imagined herself to be blushing deeply, whereas, in point of fact, the colour had all faded out of her face, leaving her quite strangely white; a wrong method of proclaiming innocence. Could she have known what was coming,—have been prepared in any way,—her histrionic adaptiveness might have been called up to meet this emergency. She could have taken the letter from the hand of the maid with a light jesting remark and no change of front. But now, struck dumb by this unlooked-for occurrence, and caught in the very flow of daring speech, she was thrown out of her composure most woefully. She took the note as if it were something that might bite, and, after holding it mechanically for a moment, made as if to break the seal, then changed her mind and thrust it away in her pocket.

She knew that to open and read it before them all indifferently, and invent some reason for his having written, would be policy ; but she also knew, with perfect certainty, that such a course was not open to her. She could not invent a lie to account for it. She must be alone to read it, and she trembled to think how excited she was inwardly by the sight of that bold handwriting, and the consciousness of romance. Her mind, after a moment's blankness, became a complete medley. She knew that she was most happy and most miserable. Happy to feel her power over the attractive warrior, and to be the heroine of a wicked little idyll ; to drink in the sensation which her nerves and emotions loved in shocking and surprising the good people around her. Wretched in the consciousness of falling in esteem, of having been unable to hide her impressions, and of grieving one whom she had learned to love and reverence. She felt horribly ashamed of herself too—of her silliness and sentimentality and weakness ; of her disgraceful commonplaceness.

But such complicated emotions as those of Vera at this juncture are utterly beyond description. One can only say two seas were

meeting, and the waves of each were lost in the other.

“Let me see: you were saying”—she turned to Mr. Grant with a fine effort of control. He was watching her face curiously.

“I was saying what a small thing will turn a lady’s mind from the subject in hand, and stop the flood of her eloquence,” he said, with the same amused smile, only diluted with some fresh ingredient which it would be hard to analyse. “You were talking politics, Miss Variable, and now a *billet-doux* has changed your current, and I don’t believe you even remember where you were.”

“Oh yes, but I do!” Her quick understanding leaped back over the breach. “I was saying the Liberal of the Future—with a large F—had a victor’s career before him. He will quite reason away the steady-going old Tory of the pleiocene period until there is nothing left of him but his frown—like the smile of the wonderland ‘Cheshire Cat’: after which, he, the Radical, will ruin the country in the best possible form, and after the best possible models, according to the best possible modern theories of his cult.”

“Then do I understand that your sympathy is not all on his side?”

“I? I am the most unpronounced of Radical Tories extant. I cultivate an immense fund of argument that will apply equally well on either side. As a rule, like the independent person in the story, I am on the side of the man with the big axe! It is as well to be so. Until our muscles have been developed by a few generations of mental and physical gymnastics, we women cannot afford to despise the man with the big axe.”

“Do you refer to Mr. Gladstone?” inquired a stout man on her left, who was an authority upon land, and a firm adherent of law and order. Vera laughed, yet a little uncertainly. It is astonishing how much sooner we obtain control of speech than we can master the laughing apparatus. A hen can chatter fast enough until she laughs with ecstatic elation over her new-laid egg, and then her voice goes off into a most hysterical whoop!

Vera's laugh had such a queer ring at the end that she checked it suddenly.

“I was not intending to be personal,” she said: “although, perhaps, the right honour-

able gentleman might serve well for illustration—a good many people have refuge under his axe. Don't be angry when I say that there are *axtenuating* circumstances."

The groans died away in the sounds of a most obstreperous gong, which at this point announced the welcome hour of lunch. In the distribution of seats Vera found herself next to the "Bounder," who, still hot and desperately thirsty, cast longing glances at his empty glasses.

"I believe," he whispered to her in confidence, "I could swallow the Atlantic Ocean! Don't be frightened if you hear me hiss when I begin to pour liquid down my throat."

"I will be surprised at nothing. Very bad form to be surprised, is it not?"

"Awfully bad! Thanks," to the servant; then, *sotto voce*, "I say, Barnes, get me something to drink quickly, before there's an inquest, there's a good fellow. Nothing like being on good terms with the servants of a house, Miss Grace."

"I agree with you." Vera's thoughts flew to the maid who had brought her Captain Dalton's note, and she began vaguely to wonder

whether he had neglected this excellent maxim unintentionally.

“I always tell Barnes he’s a perfect paragon, and it pays, I can tell you. Here he comes with a bottle of hock. I should prefer beer, but it wouldn’t do to say so. Now please talk to your next-door neighbour while I quench. I don’t want to shock you more than is strictly necessary.”

“A priori,” who sat on her other hand, was listening amused.

“Has it ever occurred to you,” said Vera, turning to him, “to compare the quantity of liquor consumed by man in proportion to that consumed by woman? I have often speculated upon whether, if one could reduce man to the same amount of fluid as we drink, and then train ourselves to drink as much as your sex, whether, I say, *we* should become the masters of creation; in short, whether all this additional liquid does not go to help generate muscle and will power? What if it be not a question of sex or education at all, but merely of habit?”

He laughed.

“Is there any subject under heaven or upon earth over which you have not speculated?” he said.

“Plenty. I have never speculated upon horses the least atom in the world.”

“Haven’t you?” put in the “Bounder” here, having scored against his thirst successfully. “Why, I thought you were quite a sportswoman, Miss Grace.”

“So I am; although I neither hunt, nor shoot, nor bet. But there are different kinds of sport, you know.”

He looked puzzled.

“I should like to see you on a horse, though. By Jove, you’d knock ’em in the hunting-field; I know,” he said admiringly. “And you do ride, don’t you?”

“Yes: hobbies of different kinds. I am a random rider and a reckless speculator, who knows no more about horses than about Sanscrit!”

“Ah! I know lots of fellows like that. They generally get let in, though. I advise you to chuck it, Miss Grace, before you get the worst of it.”

“Before it chucks you, I suppose you mean to say,” ventured Gordon.

“Yes. It’s no good dabbling in betting unless you are sure of your tips, and can use your own judgment, not a bit. Now, if you

want a good thing for the St. Leger, I can give you a surety. What do you say?"

"Is it gloves?" asked Vera innocently.

"Oh, anything you like. Do you want to make your fortune, that's all? Because you've only to put a pot on a horse I could name. But what will you give me for the information?"

"I'd rather have the mustard, if you don't mind passing it," said Vera, demurely shifting her eyes.

"Will you give me that sweet little rosebud you're wearing, if I promise to make your fortune?"

Vera looked at him. The temptation was too strong.

"Yes, when nobody is looking," she said under her breath. She looked up and caught Frank Thorold's eyes. He knew by her side glance what was going on.

"What an idiot I am!" thought Vera; and for the rest of lunch she was very quiet, accepting the young man's valuable information and polite attentions with as little sweetness as she could help. He was quite happy in showing off to Frank what a thorough "masher" and man of the world he was, and how even a lovely

and queenly woman like Veronica Grace could not resist him.

Lunch over, Vera, in hot haste to get to her own society, ran against the sporting youth, as he lounged out of the smoking-room.

“You haven’t given me the rose yet,” he said.

“Here!” Vera stood half-way up the stairs and looked over the banisters at him. She threw the bud into his hands.

“Thanks awfully! You are delicious!”

His eyes shone. The girl called Lily, coming into the hall just then, bit her lips and turned round. Vera saw her, and was sorry again. “What an idiot I am!” she said to herself once more.

CHAPTER VI.

"Passions spin the plot.

We are betrayed by what is false within."

GEORGE MEREDITH.

ONCE in her room, with the letter in her hand, Vera trembled again with excitement, hardly daring to open and read. She had fully intended to close the Dalton episode, and think no more than was necessary to repentance about the captain and his love-making. Now, with his note lying open, all the proceedings of last night rose up before her in vivid realization; she felt the pressure of his encircling arm, and heard his warm, impassioned words.

"I am obliged to take my wife away," the letter ran, "as she saw, or heard, more than was intended for her last night; and I am afraid she is likely to create a scandal, which, for your sake, I am anxious to avoid. But I must see you again, my dearest, as I am starving for you, and lay awake all night cursing

fate, that prevented our meeting until now. I am going to Paris next week. Will you show yourself the brave, unconventional woman that I know you are at heart, and come too? You should never regret such a step, if you would only trust yourself to me. Let me have a line as soon as possible. I shall be dying to hear from you.—Yours ever,

“FORDYCE DALTON.”

“My God, what a villain!” was her first inaudible ejaculation.

“Can I really have submitted myself to this—have laid myself open to such an insult of my own free will? Never! There must have been a devil in it, somewhere, who transformed me. Go with him to Paris! If I did, I would strangle him in my arms!” She laughed queerly, and held the letter at arm’s length, as if afraid of inhaling its superlative atrocity.

Despite her sentimentalism and romanticism, her craving for excitement and pleasure in the breath of passion, she was really pained; and, perhaps because of these characteristics, she detected instantly the lack of sincerity in the words she had just been reading, for she went on—

“And he does not even love me—not the least bit in the world; if he did, I might feel less strangely—more disposed to pity him. But it is not love, and what is it? Can it be the same mystery that drew me to his arms? For most certainly I do not love him. O Garry, Garry! forgive me. What does this man want if not my love? What did I take from him? What pleasure in his flattering words and caresses, when I neither love nor respect him? Excitement, romance, and the human contact that feeds a flame in one! This hateful physical nature that underlies and undermines our spiritual force, are we to be for ever slaves to it, or is this the last struggle of effete materialism?”

In her thoughts the questions ran off rapidly, without stopping for any answer, which indeed there could not be. She sat for hours torturing and analysing herself, while ever and uppermost came her old cry—“Why am I not a better or a worse woman? It would be more satisfactory to be positively bad and wicked, than negatively shifty, with an uneasy conscience, neither properly one thing nor the other—a grey mean between black and white!”

Then she recognised need for action, and sat down to her desk to write to Dalton.

Her first letter was full of scorn. Her second was full of pity. Her third was full of indifference. Her fourth was too metaphysical. Her fifth was too argumentative. Her sixth was too incoherent. At length she wrote—

“You ought not to have written, but I blame only myself. I was mad last night, and so were you, but we must live it down, and resolve to atone. My answer to your invitation is *No*, a thousand times over, if necessary. You have mistaken me, but it was my fault. Try to be true, or you will regret your infidelity to the last hour of your life. If we cannot be true, we are no better than beasts—worse, because a dog is faithful. Understand, I do not blame you, only warn. I am very miserable and remorseful, and have lost my self-respect.—Yours sincerely,

“VERONICA GRACE.”

This she tore up, and then wrote it out word for word again. She put the envelope to her lips and sealed it firmly, just as Sylvia's maid knocked at her door with a summons to afternoon tea. After copying the address Dal-

ton had given her, she put the letter in her pocket and went downstairs, intending to slip out before dinner and post it at the nearest village. This she found very difficult, as she was instantly seized upon by the "Bounder," to play some accompaniments for him, which lasted till late in the afternoon. Feeling profoundly depressed, for it was impossible to avoid noticing the cold looks of her hostess, or to get a word with Sylvia, she managed at last to creep out and post her letter. Here her good fortune again deserted her, for just as she was putting the letter into the post-office mouth, she found herself face to face with Mrs. Grant's maid, the same who had given her the note in the morning. Another piece of damning evidence, she thought to herself, as she coloured hotly, knowing well the girl understood her errand, and that it would lose nothing in her imagination.

Dinner was a very trying ordeal that night. She was not hungry, but was obliged to conceal her lack of appetite for the sake of appearances. To keep up her laughter and light talk as usual was well-nigh impossible, whilst she fancied every one was mentally scanning and scorning her; and yet she dared not be

silent. The letter weighed heavily upon her, and kept rising up, a very Banquo, before her. It seemed as though allusions to the Daltons were in the air, for nearly every one talked of Captain Dalton and his affairs generally. There was an unflattering tone in the comments upon him, although every one concurred in praising Mrs. Dalton, speaking of her gentleness and acknowledged sweetness of character, which there was no denying. Yet Vera could not help wondering whether some of the remarks were not shafts aimed at her, for her hypersensitive vanity was all alive, and she was quite prepared to accept every compliment to Mrs. Dalton as a harsh criticism on herself.

And the worst was to come in the drawing-room after dinner, when the ladies were alone.

She approached Mrs. Grant, who had taken up some work (her fingers were never idle), and, sitting down by her, determined to try and win back the friendship and confidence which she felt she had justly forfeited.

“Mrs. Grant,” she began tremulously, “I am so afraid you are vexed with me. I know what it is about, and I am so very sorry. You

can't be more angry with me than I am with myself."

She stopped with an ache at her throat.

After a moment's silence, Mrs. Grant said, as coldly as it was in her nature to speak—

"Please don't apologise to me, Veronica. You know your own affairs, and whether your conscience approves your actions or not. I do not expect you to understand my old-fashioned ideas. I am sorry to have been mistaken in you, and hope your influence over Sylvia may not be to her disadvantage."

She could not possibly have said anything that would hurt Vera more than this. The tears smarted into her eyes, and she bit her lip with a fierce anger mingled in her pain.

People seldom spoke plainly to Vera, and she could not bear it. She might criticise and censure herself, but none else must do so. Rising from her seat, she stood before Mrs. Grant and said, with very forced calmness, which she borrowed from her wounded pride—

"If you think I am a bad companion for Sylvia, of course there is only one course to take. I will not force my contaminating presence upon you any longer than is quite necessary. I shall be able to get my boxes

packed quite easily, by the first thing to-morrow morning ; so I will go and begin at once."

She turned to leave the room. Mrs. Grant rose and arrested her.

"You must not take offence so easily," she said contritely, for she was nothing, if not the kindest little woman in the world. "I do not want you to hurry away ; I hope I have never said anything to turn a guest from my house. Don't be hasty, Vera, but remember Sylvia comes first in all my calculations, and I have tried to bring her up carefully."

The struggle between hospitality and suspicion in her tone was painfully apparent to quivering Vera, who was waiting on tension for more darts to pierce her. She had some difficulty in controlling her voice when she said—

"I quite understand, Mrs. Grant. Please believe I don't care to stay here if I have lost your confidence ; that is all. I have trespassed on your kindness quite long enough."

She made her way past her hostess into the hall and upstairs, where she indulged in the usual luxury of "a good cry." After that she

began to pack, and was in the middle of that operation when Sylvia entered, bearing wine and cake. She looked amazed when she saw what her friend was doing.

"Vera, what on earth are you about?" she exclaimed.

"Packing," said Vera laconically.

"What for? You are not going away?"

"Yes, I am, early to-morrow."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say, dear;" keeping her red eyes in the shadow.

Sylvia put her little tray down upon the table, and, walking straight up to her, put her arm round her shoulders.

"But I say you're not going away. I won't have it. What reason have you for going?"

"The good reason that I am no longer a welcome guest."

"What utter rubbish!"

"It is not rubbish, Sylvia, but quite true. Don't you see how your mother and all your friends regard me? As a low, fast, adventuress, involved in a flirtation with a married man, who is unworthy of his lovely and virtuous and ill-used wife. Perhaps they are all

right. Anyhow, I do not wish to defile your house by my presence any longer."

Sylvia only replied with—

"You are the greatest goose I know."

She sat down on the bed and prepared to argue.

"Because," she said, "they talked a lot of gossip at dinner about Captain Dalton and his wife, you fancy every one knows what happened last night, whereas"—

"Every one knows I had a letter from Captain Dalton, left by him with a maid, who handed it to me before all the dowagers this morning. That is enough."

"A letter!" exclaimed Sylvia, astonished beyond measure. "Why, what did he say?"

"Here it is; you can read it," was the answer.

Sylvia read it through carefully, her mouth growing more and more scornful, and her eyebrows almost meeting. Vera thought of Mrs. Grant's words, and wondered for a second whether she ought to have let Sylvia see how base a man can be. But, reflecting that such plumes would not suffer soil to cling, she did not really regret the action. Sylvia handed it back and said—

“What answer have you given?”

“What do you think?”

“Of course I know. But did you let him see how angry you were?”

“I think so—that is, no. What right had I to be angry with him? I told him I blamed only myself.”

“Why should you? At least you were false to no one but yourself.”

“And is not that enough? O Sylvia! don’t let me feel that in forgiving and condoning my wrong, you are undermining your own standard. That would be indeed corruption, and the most horrible thought I could have.”

Sylvia was silent.

“How morbid you are?” she said at length.

Her clear, healthy spirit was puzzled again. Had she felt and known, as Vera did, the thing was wrong, she could not have done it. It was impossible to comprehend a being who could so divorce conviction and action that her ideal should be in the clouds, and her practice could not lift itself from quagmire.

“Morbid!” Vera laughed bitterly. “I don’t think I am morbid, but only variable,

as all shallow people are by nature. One moment I am off the ground, and the next wallowing. Now, a truly morbid person never flies in the ether of exhilaration, I fancy."

"Nevertheless, you are morbid, and you are not shallow," said Sylvia slowly. "I will not have it that you are shallow, Vera. You are sometimes too deep for me, I know, and I don't wish to think myself shallow. Perhaps if you did not expect so much from yourself, you would succeed better."

"Oh no, you are wrong. If I did not desire so much, I should get even less. But what is the use of talking? I talk and write too much. The silent people are the most practical."

"Then let us leave off talking, and hang up your frocks again. I am not going to let you go."

"I must, Sylvia. I have told Mrs. Grant"—

"Mother does not want you to go."

"She does."

"Absurd! she does not. Why have you never worn this yellow gown?"

"I fancied it did not suit me."

"Oh, vanity! What does it matter to

you, Vera? it is yourself that can charm without any need of studying what is becoming. I heard Lionel Forsyth say only yesterday that you could 'knock spots' out of the younger and prettier girls. What did that mean, pray, but"—

"That I know how to clothe myself better, and make the most of my waning charms, that's all. Never despise dress, Sylvia."

"I do. It seems such waste of time to think about what one puts on."

"So it does." Vera sighed. She was too depressed to argue. Sitting down by the side of the bed, she weakly watched Sylvia hanging up her gowns again in wardrobes and closets. Sylvia, placid, serious, and robed in white, was a very refreshing object to her, jaded as she was by nervous discord. As she ate the cake and drank the wine that her little friend had so thoughtfully brought her (having noted how little she ate at dinner), Vera began to feel better. After all, perhaps she had been morbid, she reflected, and what is the good of sitting down helplessly and moaning over one's failings? But still she must go. It was necessary that she should quit these scenes of enervating pleasure (so she

told Sylvia), and return to her scribbling. She felt choke-full of ideas just now, and she ought to be working at her craft, redeeming the promise of her first attempt in the realms of fiction. Full of undirected energy as she was, idleness ravaged and corrupted her. The place left empty by non-fulfilment of a daily task was a waste spot for evil to come and revel in. So she argued, with her usual pseudo-logical careless eloquence of expression, emphasised in dark eyes and soft voice. But Sylvia persisted.

“You shall write here. You shall have my little den all to yourself several hours a day, and no one shall disturb you, until we go”—(to Oxford)—“did I not promise you so?”

“You did; but I have not availed myself of your promise. Captain Dalton was metal that magnetised me from your little den. Sylvia, why am I such a fool as to be attracted by a red coat, or the shadow of one?”

“My dear Vera, does it not sometimes occur to you that you are for ever asking me riddles without answers? How can I tell you why a red coat, as you call it, should be an attraction to you? It isn't to me. Are you sure

it was the redness of the coat? Sometimes you say it was something else, undefinable."

"Yes, I know; but the colour helps. There is something about a soldier that fires me through and through."

"Because you are abnormally imaginative and romantic, I presume. It is all fancy. And with your gifts you ought to be above such rubbish."

"Gifts! what are my gifts, I wonder?" Vera laughed. How she enjoyed talking about herself! "An easy tongue, a quick pen, and a frothy laugh; an ear for rhythm, and a talent for self-deception."

Sylvia looked grieved.

"If you talk like that, you deserve that God should take away all your talents,—your power of conception, your splendid fancy and command of illustration," she said gently. "Be earnest for a moment, Vera, and say there is nothing on earth you would take in exchange for these."

A quick change came over Vera's mocking face. Something seemed to lift from it, and, as she raised herself, her eyes dilated with a strange flame, and her whole face became splendidly illuminated.

Her voice was deep with expression, and it was another Vera who broke the minute of silence.

“There is nothing I would take for my power—nothing. No, not even love; though love is so sweet. How can I best coin myself into useful currency? How best keep my light clear for others to see by? How keep my lantern from dust and rust? You are right, Sylvia; and I am not deceived. The light is there, but it has to struggle through such dirt-stained glass. O Sylvia! if you should ever have a girl, never let her tread the road with weak and trivial companionship, as I have done. It avalanches character. Take care of your *teens*, the *tys* will take care of themselves. No; I am not laughing, but quite, quite sober.” And she meant every word she said. The mood continued till sleep overcame her.

CHAPTER VII.

“Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.”

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

It was very early in the morning, before the sun had found time to make huge, blotchy shadows of the elms outside on the soft turf, when Sylvia heard a soft tap at her door, and, looking up drowsily, saw by the dawn-light a dressing-robed figure enter the room. Vera still slept soundly, as she always did when once in slumber. The mood-striven people always have that great consolation,—when once asleep, they are hard to awaken.

“What is the matter?” whispered Sylvia, alert on the instant, and recognising at the same time her mother.

“So sorry to disturb you, darling, but have you any sal-volatile? Such a fix! Green brought me my tea just now, and she said Grimson had been very ill all night, so I went

to her ; and, do you know, I believe she has measles."

Poor Mrs. Grant's voice was full of horror. Measles may be tragic enough when you have a house-full of guests likely to be panic-stricken.

"O mother !" Sylvia was out of bed and standing beside her. "What is to be done? Have you sent for Dr. Steward?"

"Yes ; but don't come near me, Sylvia. If my suspicions are correct, we must see about getting every one out of the house at once. I should like you to go too, as you have only had the complaint very mildly when you were a child, and it is dangerous to adults, I believe."

Sylvia's pretty lips curled, as she made her customary remark—

"What rubbish ! Do you think I am going away to leave *you*? You are more of an adult than I am, if it comes to that question, aren't you?"

Mrs. Grant was too anxious to laugh. She looked to where Vera lay, sleeping peacefully.

"Your friend talked of going last night," she said ; "so that is all right." She thought to herself, it was an ill wind that blew nobody

any good ; and perhaps Vera was, after all, more dangerous to Sylvia than measles. But she did not say this to Sylvia.

“Yes. I would not hear of it last night, but of course she must go now. Vera is one of those impressionable sort of people who are sure to catch everything.”

Perhaps it was hearing her name mentioned that aroused Vera at this juncture. She lifted herself from her pillow, and said—

“What’s happened ?” drowsily, with large eyes only half-open.

“Tell her, Sylvia,” said Mrs. Grant, going to seek in a cupboard for sal-volatile.

“It is only measles, dear ; go back to sleep,” said Sylvia in a motherly manner.

“Measles ?” Vera was wide awake now. “Who has it—them ?”

“The parlour-maid, Grimson. It is only a suspicion as yet. We will hope it’s not true.”

Vera sat up and pushed back her fair hair. “What an awful nuisance !” she said. “When shall you know for certain ?”

“When the doctor appears—I hope soon,” said Mrs. Grant, going to the door. “You had better stay in your room, girls, and I will send up your breakfast. Then, if it should

turn out to be measles, Vera can go straight off at once without any risk."

She did not wait for any reply, but closed the door after her and was gone.

Vera began to dress quietly.

"Does your mother really think," she asked Sylvia, "that we shall submit to be treated like children, and keep in our room to be waited upon, whilst she is worrying herself to pieces? I, for one, protest. "Sylvia, I'm going to stay and nurse that parlour-maid."

"What rubbish!" exclaimed the other. "You'd be sure to catch whatever it was, and then we should have to nurse you too."

"With all due respect to your prescience, dear, I am not sure to catch anything. I never caught anything in my life yet—not even a man! therefore I am a most proper person for a nurse. And you, a delicate fledgling, are most unsafe. You had better go away at once. I shall advise Mrs. Grant."

"Do be serious, Vera."

"Never was more serious in my life. Is not measles a serious matter? It spoils a complexion horribly, and what is more serious to a woman than her complexion? Depend

upon it, Sylvia, I've found my vocation at last—it is to be a nurse ! ”

The confusion in that house, after about four hours had passed, and the doctor's verdict in favour of the infantine complaint had been given, can better be fancied than described !

Panic in civilised society is much the same as it is in a horde of savages. Of course no one thought of any danger to him or herself, but each had some dear one whose life would be imperilled if he or she stayed in the infected area one moment longer than was strictly necessary. Every one, more or less, took to the bedrooms, whence came sounds of heavy trunks rolled about ; and the constant ringing of bells for maids constituted down-stair-life a burden. It is possible that one or two well-meaning visitors really thought it would be kindness to take themselves off quickly, now that their hostess would not want any further anxiety ; but they certainly did not consider that, to have taken matters a little less severely, so as not to have thrown the household into a state of disorder, might have exhibited a greater sympathy for her condition. Vera tried to help the most exacting, and ran about giving orders like a

daughter of the house. Sylvia looked out trains and wrote labels, received condolences, and tried to keep the servants in good humour.

This last was not an easy matter, and more than one, driven to despair by fear of infection and constant bell-ringing, gave notice on the spot!

How anybody got any luncheon was a mystery! It was the scratchiest of scratch meals, and several people went without it altogether, in order to catch trains. At five o'clock, the only people left in the house, besides the Grants themselves, were Frank Thorold, Noel Gordon, and Vera, who sat down to afternoon tea with a comfortable sensation that the worst was over, and they could enjoy deserved peace. No one had been able to breathe for the last six or seven hours. Frank had been driving the dog-cart madly to and from the station all day, and "A priori" had done duty as an extra groom. Now they were all very merry over the non-intoxicating cup, and Vera was sending them into fits of laughter by her speculations as to the number of measles that had been carried away, and the quantity left for them to divide between

them. A measle, she supposed, was a sort of microbe, a thing which she had heard of as possessing manifold possibilities, and now vast legions of those interesting atoms must be laughing up their sleeves in the trunks of the frightened ones. Her theory, she explained, was, that if an army of measles made its way into a house, it distributed itself impartially in all the corners, whilst the general tossed up to see who should be attacked first! Therefore it was useless to try and escape. All you can do is to feed your own little internal army of disease-fighters well—to victual your garrison with plenty of good air and nourishment—so that the enemy can be routed in your person upon the first onslaught. She concluded by declaring her conviction that there was a fearful struggle going on inside of all of them at that present moment,—a battle of bacilli, so to speak,—but that she had not the slightest doubt their own forces would conquer. A measle is only a measle, after all, and you have but to make up your mind to be too strong for him. So she ran on, until suddenly, as if struck by an idea, she rose hastily, put down her empty tea-cup and disappeared from the room.

Stepping up-stairs as lightly as possible, she reached the sick-room, where she expected to find Mrs. Grant.

“Come in!” said that lady’s voice, as she tapped; and sure enough there was Mrs. Grant, very surprised to see her.

“I’ve come to know if I can be of any use,” said Vera, with a lowered voice, as Mrs. Grant, at the same time, waved her back towards the door. “I am not a bit frightened, and I should like to try my hand at nursing. Won’t you tell me what to do?”

Her hostess looked at her critically, as if doubting the extent of her earnestness. What she read in Vera’s face need not be told. Sufficient to say that it satisfied her, and she said quietly—

“I may be very glad of your help in a few days if the case develops into a bad one, as I fear it will. At present, dear, there is nothing to be done, unless you will just sprinkle me, and yourself, with Condyl before we go down. I suppose everybody who is afraid has gone?”

Vera told her who were left, and she was rather astonished.

“Frank Thorold!” she said, as they closed

the door behind them, after a few words to the patient. "I wish he had gone. I am sorry that boy ever came here; he seems to be getting very unsteady. Last night, I grieve to say, he came into the drawing-room much the worse for the wine he had been drinking. I told Mr. Grant to mount guard over those silly boys, but they are always so headstrong and wilful. Frank's mother was a great friend of mine, so I feel an interest in him apart from himself. Now, if he were to take the infection"—

"I don't think he will," said Vera, following Mrs. Grant to her room, where she proceeded to make changes in her toilette. "He seems physically strong, and he has been awfully useful all day, driving to and from the station. I am very sorry about last night. I did not know he was unsteady."

A sudden pang recalled his face in the garden the night he had kept her from Mrs. Dalton. Was this to be another conscience-blade, and smite her? Who would be guilty of the crime of breaking a boy's ideal? Surely it were better a millstone were hanged about her neck! she reflected mournfully.

Mrs. Grant was answering her.

“I never thought him anything but a good, steady boy ; but you know they get amongst all sorts of companions at Sandhurst, and his father being rich, I expect he thinks, gives him a reason for reckless living. I know he has run into debt several times, but I never heard he was addicted to drinking more than was good for him. Poor boy ! I hope he has nothing on his mind now—debts, I mean, or troubles of that kind. Although I have no sons of my own, I know the scrapes youngsters are likely to fall into, and can pity them.”

Vera listened still guiltily. Every word stabbed her spirit, and although she was not religious enough to say, “God forgive me if I have hurt one of the little ones,” she felt truly remorseful for any share she might have had in the injury of this lad who had loved her. She did not desire her conscience to forgive her.

“If I do wrong, may my conscience impeach me !” was the only prayer she was likely to utter. So she writhed a little, and then took comfort in her own suffering, as usual.

She never had another cold word or look from Mrs. Grant during the weeks that fol-

lowed, which were weeks of anxiety, as the maid had a very bad time. Added to that, two other servants fell ill of the complaint, and had it mildly. No one else caught it, fortunately; and Thorold and Gordon left a few days after the rest of the company.

Sylvia was very quiet and sad the day “*A priori*” went. The rest of them thought the parting disturbed her, but it was not altogether that. The morning of his departure her lover had gone with her to one of those quiet corners of the garden proverbially dedicated to the amorous, and there they talked out a subject that had been agitating them for some time.

It is a well-known fact that lovers must have something to wrangle and make up over. These two were not superior to the weakness of their kind.

Said Gordon—

“You see, Sylvia, as I said before, there is not the slightest necessity for my wife to be a Bachelor of Arts or a *savante* in any way. Indeed, I should prefer you as you are—not too blue, or with the critical faculty too highly developed. And I think most men would agree with me.”

“Very likely,” said Sylvia promptly. “You know what I think about ‘most men,’ Noel.”

“But why are you so anxious to be my equal in learning?”

“I never can be that.”

“You can, but I hope you won’t. Let me have superiority in knowledge, as you have it in all other directions.”

“Don’t blarney, Noel. You know I have set my heart upon becoming a cultivated woman. Why should you try to thwart me?”

“Because, once more, I am not a rich man, and I want a wife who can manage my household—for I hold domesticity the greatest, very greatest function of a true woman. I want her to be Queen of our little home-realm; and not only that, but Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. I wish to represent only Labour and Capital, and it will not be within my province to interfere with the Budget.” He spoke jestingly, but with earnest meaning behind.

Sylvia knitted her fine eyebrows.

“Then you think I couldn’t manage your house properly unless I remain an ignora-mus?” she said. “Is that logical deduction,

pray, and from what premises do you conclude as much? Is not a woman better all round for using her brains? Would a mathematical pass certificate prevent me from keeping accurate household accounts? Surely you have no ground for such an assumption as that!"

"It is not that. But you know quite enough mathematics, and you are already capable of being a perfect wife, sympathetic companion, and capital manager. Why wish for more?"

"Oh, you dear old goose!" cried Sylvia. "Why do you not say at once, 'You will have me for a husband, and you know enough to appreciate my cleverness; is not that sufficient?' Have you considered for one moment that I am a nineteenth-century woman?"

She drew herself up proudly.

"A nineteenth-century child, you mean."

"I am nearly twenty, and you ought not to want to marry a child. I gave you credit for more sense."

"Now you are getting severe."

"I must be. You are too exacting. Seriously, Noel, I do not consider that the one end and aim of a woman's life is to get married;

and, having attained that, she is to let all other things go."

"But I detect a fallacy. You cannot say I ever admitted, *a priori*, that the one aim of a woman's life was to get married."

"You implied it, sir."

"I did not. But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that marriage is an excellent sphere for a woman: will the mastery of Integral Calculus, and ability to read Plato in the original, tend to make her a better wife and mother?"

"Yes, most decidedly."

"Oh, very well. I give in. Because it does, I suppose."

"Exactly. Anything that widens a woman's ideas, and takes her above the feeble trivialities of feminine life, ennobles her nature, and fits her more thoroughly for the most exalted career of wife and mother to which you have referred!—prepares her to be the mate of a high-minded man!"

"By the 'feeble trivialities of feminine life' I presume you mean dressing herself tastefully, looking after her servants, and seeing that her husband is not poisoned by ill-cooked food?"

“I have never heard that to dress tastefully required an uncultivated mind. And as for food, she would share it with her husband, I suppose, and they would be poisoned together.”

“Don’t be flippant, little Sylvia. I detect more fallacies in your premises.”

“Yes ; and you will go on detecting more and more, until I learn how to argue. Imagine the crushings I should get ! Every sentence of mine made a peg on which to hang a syllogism ! The very first thing I read, when I get to Oxford, shall be logic !”

“Learn how to argue. Ye gods ! To think of a wife who has mastered rhetoric and polemics ! Sylvia, kill me outright and have done with me.”

“There !” Sylvia exclaimed triumphantly : “at last I have got to the root of your aversion for my studying at Somerville. You are afraid I shall crush you in argument. How lovely ! *Now* I am *determined* to go. It will be glorious to detect *your* fallacies !”

She looked more animated than usual, and her soft eyes glowed darkly. He wanted to kiss her, but refrained, because he desired very much to finish the discussion, and knew osculation would put an end to it.

“And you always say women are born illogical,” she continued, warming with her theme: “so you shall just see what education in that branch can do for me. I will quote old Aristotle at you till you cry for mercy, and then pursue you with ‘undistributed middles.’ You see I know something of the subject already.”

“A great deal, apparently! You know quite enough, Sylvia. You can crush me without the smallest notion of logic or rhetoric, darling, if that is all you desire. Now I am going to shift my position a bit. Granting that you have a right to cultivate to the fullest extent that nineteenth-century little head of yours, there is yet something else to be considered. At the very least, you can do nothing at Oxford much under three years, and during that time I shall be waiting alone for you—a solitary, dejected bachelor. Can your tender heart suffer the thought of my distress?”

“Three years are nothing. I could not marry you for two years anyhow, until I am twenty-one: you know what father said. And as you say I am such a child”—She broke off mischievously, with a laugh of enjoyment.

He looked at her with eyes meant to be sorrowful. She laughed the more.

“You know I was only joking,” he said seriously. “You are quite womanly enough, except for your unkindness, which is almost fiendish! There is no reason why we should not be married the day after you are twenty-one; and then, if you liked, I could ‘grind you up’ for anything you wished, and I have no doubt you would get through with flying colours under my ardent coaching.”

This sounded attractive, but it was so palpably a bait.

“You would grind my bones to make your bread, like the ogre in the nursery-rhyme, I believe! No, Mr. Noel; I distrust you, sir. You have not the emancipation of women sufficiently at heart to undertake my mental training when we are married. No. I must work out my destiny by going to Somerville and reading hard. Then, in three years’ time, or so, when I am a full-fledged graduate, you shall have what is left of Sylvia.”

There was purpose under her smiling lips, and he knew better than to talk any more. But he was equally determined. Her victory in the discussion left her sadder than before,

naturally. (A woman does not enjoy vanquishing a lover in argument; she prefers to be beaten.) So that was why obstinate little Sylvia felt more depressed at parting from her professor than the occasion warranted,—more than if he had conquered her and made her promise to marry him at once. Such is the contrary inconsistency of the unemancipated girl of the period: only, fortunately, men have not yet quite found her out!

CHAPTER VIII.

“If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love’s sake only.”

E. B. BROWNING—*Translation.*

Two days later the morning post plunged Vera into a furious state of excitement. A letter came to her, forwarded from home, with a foreign postmark, at the sight of which her heart beat to stifling, and a flood of pink colour ran into her face, lending her ten years of youth.

She did not open it until her room was reached, and even then her fingers played on the seal nervously before the envelope was torn open.

The letter was short. It only said that the writer was likely to come home at Christmas-tide, and hoped to find Vera as kind as she had ever been to him, for he would have a favour to ask of her, which he would not trust to a letter at such a distance, though she might

guess it. All he dared to hope now was that he should find her free, and that he had not been mistaken in concluding that she had some regard for him. It was unmistakable. The tone of an anxious lover breathed through it, as he wrote of his prospects, now more happily settled than formerly, and of his desire to rest at home in England for the future. About the letter there was the dash and flourish of a man accustomed to an unrestful life, and of not too stable a character, but this passed unnoticed by Vera. For she loved the writer: she loved the scrawly, illegible signature of Garrick Maitland, and, while knowing well the man, accepted him with all faults clear to her well-opened eyes.

The thin pages were wrapped round a photograph, which gave an impression of a particularly good-looking face, not very strong, perhaps, but fair and dauntless, with a general look of *insouciance* and laughing disdain upon it. The lips curled upwards a little under a moustache not sufficient to hide their fine curves, and the closely-cropped hair showed a tendency to wave away from the forehead, which was broad and frank. You would say it was somewhat of a dandy there, from the

cut of the hair and the necktie ; somewhat of a fighter from the square of the shoulders ; somewhat of a dare-devil from the fearless eyes and straight throat ; somewhat of a voluptuary from the full mouth and rounded chin ; and nothing of a dreamer, an idealist, or a moralist. A man of action, or nothing.

All this Vera knew well. She also knew he had played with her more or less for years, ever since she had been a silly school-girl and he a wild youth, mad upon pleasure and mischief. He had always shown affection for her, and even spoken of it, but had never attempted to bind her and himself by any promise that might involve self-sacrifice. She knew his vanity made him fickle, and had power to draw him into toils which were hard to break from. She knew he had cared for her in a careless but jealous fashion for a long time, as much as he could care for any woman. She knew he was brave and honest and truthful, and honourable according to a crude sense of honour,—not a sensitive one,—and that of all men she had ever known he had most completely subdued and fascinated her. That was enough for her, even with her great ideals and keen sense of what is noblest and best in the individual.

At all events, this letter offered her all she had most longed for, and yearned for, and ached for.

It seemed the realisation of a hope she had scarcely dared to frame: and even had she known it would bring certain torture in its train, she would have hailed it and wept with delight over it, as she did now. Every other thought and sensation was chased out of her heart and mind by this prime emotion, as surely as dead leaves are dispersed by a hurricane. She threw herself on her knees with a vague idea of praying, but her nerves, all-excited by this suddenness of joy, played pranks with her, and made her only laugh and cry hysterically. Even when Sylvia came into the room, some hours later, to find her, she was too overcome to be coherent; and, lest her friend should think she had gone mad, she handed her the letter to read.

Sylvia hardly knew what to say. Truth to tell, she had not formed the highest opinion of Mr. Garrick Maitland from certain facts she had gleaned concerning him; but now that Vera's reality of feeling was so obvious, she could but congratulate her, and listen to her outpourings of happiness.

Something about this phase of Vera jarred on her. That Vera could love a man so unreasoningly, could bless her stars for giving him to her so tearfully, could let all other ambitions sink in regard of him, and yet could not have been true to him in his absence, seemed to her painfully unnatural. She never attempted to judge Vera by her own standard, looking upon her as subject to the strange aberrations of genius; but she wished deeply that her friend were less imaginative and more reverent of what appeared to Sylvia to be sacred. Extravagance reached its highest limit in most of Vera's actions under excitement. She seemed unable to do anything in the sane and self-restrained manner which Sylvia had learned to consider essential to right womanly and ladylike behaviour. Still the younger girl was touched by her friend's unreserved delight, and looked forward to seeing her whole nature purified and controlled by it, when she should have had time to grasp fully the situation and its responsibilities. Of course as yet there was nothing to be said or done in the matter, after Vera had written to Garrick a letter of suppressed passion and veiled contentment. This took her some time.

To give the impression of certain reserve, and yet to respond heartily and frankly, was a difficult matter to accomplish in a few pages of writing, and it is no empty compliment to say of Vera that no one could have achieved it better than she did.

All the long summer afternoon she sat by her window, smiling at the bees and blue-bottles buzzing in and out of the clematis and roses framing it, with a light in her dilated eyes and a brilliant colour in her cheeks. Lost in lapses of happy thought, which led her back to scenes where Garry had been Strephon to her Chloe in the sweet, fresh heart of the country, she revelled in highest elysium, scarcely feeling the weight of her environments at all.

That she, the usually irritable and sensitive, smiled upon disturbing insects and the breezes which wafted her papers to the floor, was a sign that she had somehow got outside of herself, and pin-points could not prick her.

When the ring of teacups on the lawn beneath, where sat Mrs. Grant and Sylvia reading slumberingly, sounded on her ears, she roused herself from pleasant reveries to energy, and, pulling a rose from the casement, enclosed one

petal in her letter and wore the flower at her breast,—a little sop to sentiment which gave her ridiculously childlike pleasure.

Mrs. Grant remarked upon her beaming looks when she went down. Nursing, she said, seemed to have a good effect upon Vera: she looked most blooming and charming. Mrs. Grant supposed it was the consciousness of having been good and unselfish. She took Vera's hand and caressed it as she spoke, while Sylvia poured out the tea and chatted inconsequently to the solemn old terrier who wagged himself about the tiny tea-table. The scent of pines was in the air, and of blown roses and jasmine from the walls of the house. Altogether, there was an atmosphere of sacred peace and calm happiness enveloping them all, Vera felt, as she sank into a low wicker chair, and smoothed out her flimsy skirts with a pride in their prettiness which she never lost. There was no uneasiness. She accepted all that had come to her without foreboding, not having given time to the analysis of her situation, or to moralise on the evanescence of human bliss, as she generally did. In transport one is seldom analytical, fortunately: so for a few brief hours Vera was perfectly happy,

with no foreshadowing of dark clouds which might be gathering on the rim of her horizon. She had salved over the stinging wound in her conscience by some self-sacrifice, so that now it had ceased to trouble her. Indeed, everything was forgotten in this dazzling sunlight of fulfilled desire. She presented a smiling face and unlistening ear to all her hostess and Sylvia were saying. She gazed on the far blue of the sky with unseeing eyes, which only photographed one image on her brain. She laughed when she spoke, and drank two cups of tea without tasting them. In fact, she was just as idiotically, irrationally contented as a child who has cried for the moon and obtained a large orange. Sylvia studied her with much interest, and Mrs. Grant thought this curious condition was only one of her moods.

Until the last post came in, and that requires another chapter.

CHAPTER IX.

“Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces, does not awaken until we are pricked and stung, and sorely assailed.”—EMERSON.

AFTER dinner, Barnes brought Mrs. Grant a black-edged letter, which she received with some surprise after a glance at the handwriting. The girls were at the piano, and Mr. Grant had not yet come in for his coffee.

Vera was looking amongst the music for a song passionate enough to express the rarefied state of her emotions, when a slight cry from Mrs. Grant attracted attention from both girls.

“Sylvia, dear,” said her mother, in distressed tones, “come here. Oh, what do you think has happened?” Her voice was sufficiently shocked, to bring both of them to her side breathlessly.

Sylvia took the letter her mother handed to her, and Vera looking over her shoulder; they read it together, beside the yellow-shaded

lamp in the middle of the room. The light seemed to move curiously before Vera's eyes, and a strange stillness settled on her nerves, as she read :—

“DEAR EDITH,—I write to tell you that my poor child died this morning at half-past seven. Her baby was still-born, prematurely, and we knew from the first she would not have strength to recover herself. Captain Dalton is in Paris, as you probably know. It is his neglect and indifference that killed her. Do not judge me if I write bitterly, for I am broken-hearted. She was so sweet and good, my child !

“You know she has always been delicate and sensitive. I guarded her till she married. *He* has played with her and tired of her : there was nothing could save her then.—Yours in terrible grief,

“EMILY SHORTHOUSE.”

There was absolutely no escape from these lines in blackest ink upon whitest paper. They burnt and burnt into Vera's brain, until a mist before her eyes caused her to put up both hands to shut off the sight.

Sylvia was too shocked to speak, and for a few moments there was horrible silence.

“Dead!” said Vera at last, as if speaking in a dream;—“dead! so soon, and she was well here a month, three weeks ago, quite well—and now dead, quite dead, and”—She stopped. Mrs. Grant was crying quietly, and Sylvia still looked dazed.

A horrid vision overpowered Vera, and seemed to stop her heart-beats. She was in the avenue again, with Captain Dalton’s arms round her, and a white figure drifting towards them with a cry she could never forget. She heard it now as distinctly as she had heard it then, and the faint smell of cigar-smoke was still in her nostrils. She was stifled: it was all so real again. The white figure, would it ever cease to haunt her with that moaning cry? Would she ever be free from that loathed embrace, or wash that kiss from her lips? would the scent of that cigar cling to her for all eternity? Or was it only brought to her presence just now by the entrance of Mr. Grant, and an actual cigarette? As he stood on the threshold, Vera slipped past him out into the hall, thence into the garden, with a wild longing for darkness. But when the

cool air of the night and fragrance of pines swept over her, she was seized with an unspeakable fear. She dared not face that avenue, lest there should truly be in it a white figure with a deathly face, and lest she should hear again, not in fancy, that cry of a wounded heart. She was haunted by the invisible, and should her thoughts take bodily shape in the materially visible, she felt it would be only just retribution on her. Like to all sceptics, she was vaguely superstitious. She would have said that she distrusted her own vivid power of imagination, which might play tricks with her; but, in reality, she knew that as she believed little, she dreaded much. That which might not be also might be. It is the practical, positive person who knows what to fear, and acknowledges no chances in the matter. One moment in the darkness Vera's skin tightened with a curdling horror, and she flew upstairs with velocity, to the refuge of her lighted room. Her hands were trembling so that they almost refused to serve her, but she was unsatisfied until every candle in the room had been kindled, and a soft radiance shed into every corner. She dared not be alone in the darkness,

which, at the same time, her shamed spirit demanded.

As usual, when there was light in the room, she drifted to the long looking-glass, curious to study herself from the outside: and thus she apostrophised the tall figure before her.

“A murderess!” she kept saying, over and over to herself; “yes, distinctly a murderess, and an adulteress too, in the spirit of the term.” She set her teeth hard with the objectionable word behind them. “Why are such things as I suffered to exist? Helplessly poisonous and harmful, to prey upon our kind. I am a snare and a delusion, even to myself, for my soul” (her lip curled at the word soul) “has to do that which my body likes, and all my best and noblest ideals are like foam on the surface of a troubled sea! Great God!—if there be one—am I to live all my life with this frightful thing staring in my face, with that cry in my ears, as a deadly punishment for an hour’s careless amusement and sensuous excitement?” She saw the eyes in the mirror glaze at the thought, and the hands clench themselves spasmodically. “Is there no atonement to be made? Am I to live with it over me—with my better self pointing and saying

eternally, ‘You killed an innocent woman: you took her life—drew her life-blood from her, and went on eating and drinking sweet things over her body! Horrible, too horrible! Who are you, that you should have the rapture of love returned—the ecstasy of longing satisfied?’” Her eye fell on the table by the window, where she had lately written her answer to Garrick Maitland; and then—“Suppose it is only retribution coming swiftly upon me, and he will be as false to me as that other man to his wife.” Her mind conjured up scene after scene of treachery and infidelity—of Garry laughing at her passionate jealousy; of other women, fairer, younger, and as careless and cruel as she had been.—“I could not bear it!” she cried aloud; “I could not bear it! and yet, if there be any justice in the world, I must be punished. Ah! I dare not be happy—I dare not. I have no right to be. I must atone somehow—I must not be happy over *her* grave. Oh!” Something seemed to crack inside her head, and the glass swam before her, and floated away to the ceiling. She stretched out her arms with a cry, and fell on the ground half-fainting, and grovelling unconsciously. It was as if her

spine could no longer support this heavy weight of dishonour, to keep her "upright and heaven-facing." For some short time her bruised sense of right was numb, and she ceased from sensation. It was only when Sylvia came into the room at length, that she was roused back to life and sorrow.

"Vera," said Sylvia, "you must not take this too much to heart—you could not foresee"—

"Don't talk to me, Sylvia," was the answer, given with a long, shivering breath. "I must not be condoled with. You must see me as I am and say nothing. Your scorn is better for me than your sympathy; it will brace me to a trial of strength. Don't speak to me, but let me think it all out."

All through the night she groaned and wrestled with herself, tossing and turning feverishly, with her head on fire and aching fiercely. Every painful picture that an imagination so potent as hers could draw, was painted upon her consciousness in exaggerated colours. She saw the death-bed of the young wife and the broken-hearted mother. She recalled every feature of the former's sweet, wistful face, her pretty smile, and gentle, friendly

manner. How nice she had been to her, Vera, thought the penitent woman, with a fresh pang; how she had echoed her husband's invitation, asking Vera to go and stay with them when they were again settled; how free from suspicion, and how sympathetic she had been! "If there's justice on earth, I must suffer for this act," Vera had said to herself; but, to do her justice, she did not think of her own punishment at all now—it was only of *her*, the insulted wife, the delicate, sensitive woman who had been wronged.

The same hateful sense of mystery was over it all; the superstition of an evil possession having mastered her; the curse of fate, the futile struggle of spirit against matter,—all the baleful spells of demoniacal influences seemed to her to have been arrayed against her. It was such a trivial thing—a kiss in the open air, under the moonlight, taken after protest, and helplessly, as she had thought. Yet to have this direful consequence waiting for it, as a wild beast to pounce upon a small prey—it was preposterously inordinate. Would not Mrs. Dalton have died under any circumstances? Had he never neglected her, or shown her that he was tired of her before

Vera's advent on the scene? Surely yes; and the wife had been gradually losing her hold on life and its interests for who knows how long? These sophistries suggested themselves over and over again, but they had no power to sway the tender heart and clear reasoning of the troubled sinner. No. The facts were square, and, shave their corners as she might, square facts they remained. Captain Dalton might have been indifferent to his wife before he met Vera, but it was useless trying to ignore the fact that the wife was actual witness to a deed which indicated something more—nothing less than positive infidelity. How this had affected her she had shown pretty plainly by her faint in the garden. There was no getting over that. There was no arguing away the data of such evidence against the woman who had, as she knew perfectly well, tried her very best to attract and fascinate another woman's husband. The disproportionate results of her conduct that had wreaked vengeance upon her did not vindicate the wrong done. So she suffered acutely, and felt through it all a sense of self-suffocation, of having been blindly drawn towards sin by some overwhelming occult force, which it had been useless to try and contend

against. But with the morning she partly recovered herself, and a new strength came with the light. She formed a resolution, which, however much it might lie under the imputation of extravagance, was yet conceived and carried out in full dispassionate purpose. Rising before the sun had looked through the curtains, she dressed and seated herself at the writing-table. The letter to Garrick, which she had written yesterday, and left till to-day to post, so that she might add to it any further expression of herself that might present itself before the mail left, was torn up, and its fragments lay in a little heap by her elbow.

“I have received your letter, and understand it,” she wrote now in breathless haste, lest her will and resolve should fail her. “I have never cared so much for any one as for you, Garry, and I would give my life for you, willingly, but there can be nothing between us. I am not fit to marry an honest man. I have a deed on my conscience that forbids my ever being happy, truly happy again. Think the worst you can, and you will know what I am. You must forget me, and if you come

home, you must not try to see me, for that would only hurt us both.—Yours always wretchedly,
VERA.”

She did not even read this over, but folded it and sealed it as hurriedly as she had written it. Then she put on her hat and hastened downstairs, where she was met by an astonished housemaid, and the old fat terrier who slept before the hall door. The former wished her good morning, and asked whether she wanted to go out, offering at the same time to unbolt the door; the latter arose, shook himself carefully, and lazily followed her into the garden. There had been rain in the night, and now the sun was making diamonds on patches of grass, as it made its way through the firs and elms from the east, all gold and rose-colour in its uprising. A heavy mist of tears clouded Vera's eyes, and a stone was in her throat as she laboured along the avenue, gasping pitifully. One moment at the post-office she hesitated, then set her lips firmly, and thrust in the letter as if it had stung her suddenly. She drew a long breath between her teeth as she turned away, and walked back with a steadier step.

“Where have you been?” inquired Sylvia, as she re-entered the room.

“To the post.”

Sylvia gazed at her, full of wild speculations.

“Have you been posting your letter to Garrick Maitland?” she said at length.

“Yes,” replied Vera, with a curious laugh; “I have posted a letter to him, but not the one I wrote last night. I have told him it is no good, Sylvia; that I am an infamous woman, and he must think no more of me. It was all I could do. I dare not enjoy the happy life of which I have deprived another woman. There must be a sacrifice to atone, so I have burnt my love upon the altar.” Her voice broke. “It will be better for him. He is weak, and I am not strong enough to guide him. I will not drag him down. He shall marry a good woman.” Her breath stopped suddenly. Tears came into Sylvia’s brown eyes.

“You are morbid—too morbid!” she cried. “You cannot mean it, Vera, that you will sacrifice him, your lover, like this. Think of the harm it will do him to lose faith in you! It is not right; it is theatrical and un-

natural. What is done cannot be atoned for but by repentance and good resolutions practised out. There is no blotting out harm done ; you can only keep the rest of the page clear. And you are not so much to blame as you think, because you intended no harm ; you only thought it an innocent flirtation, and surely motive must go for something."

"Don't, Sylvia!" Vera turned on her sternly. "I may be morbid and theatrical, and no doubt I shall change my mind and regret the step I have taken within twenty-four hours. But now I am wearing sackcloth and ashes, and I am right. No amount of argument will turn a square into a circle. My weakness has led to another woman's misery and death ; it shall not doom another individual, and I will not triumph in joy over a victim. There is a time to pull up. We do not live in the age of scourges, but I can well understand the comfort of flagellation just now."

There was a fanatical light in her face, and Sylvia saw that it was useless to say more. She therefore only sighed deeply, and wondered once more at the mixture of tragi-romanticism and nineteenth-century realism in her

friend ; at the same time admitting that her own simple structure would not furnish a solution to such a problem of personality as was presented by Vera in her different aspects.

“She is a compound of Cleopatra and Electra, who has found her way into our century, and is rather lost in it,” reflected the girl, momentarily. Then her practical mind sprang back elastically to the surface of events. “But she is wrong to rush off at a tangent into such an extreme measure. Yes, she is morbid and theatrical, and I do not know what is to be done.”

CHAPTER X.

“On Tom Tiddler’s ground,
Picking up gold and silver.”

Nursery Rhyme.

A TALL young Englishman, very lightly clothed, and crowned with a broad-brimmed hat, sat outside a slightly-built wooden hut, near Zoutpansberg, smoking and turning over the leaves of a mining journal. Perhaps it is unnecessary to mention that he seemed interested in mining and gold shares, as the accident would necessarily have been his having no connection with either. The young man in the Transvaal, disconnected with gold and mining generally, does not face one every day.

The Englishman was handsome, with a pair of fearless grey eyes, set well into his head, under somewhat girlish eyelashes, and a somewhat girlish white brow, which contrasted curiously with the strong tan of his cheeks and chin down to the edge of his over-turned

open collar. It was something the face of the photograph Vera had received over in England, plus the roughness, and darkness, and general "don't-care-a-damn-ative-ness," which becomes the habit of the usual young man away from the constraints of society and home, with a powerful sun over him, and nothing between him and his natural propensity of flouting appearances.

He seemed, as we have said, much absorbed in his paper, and sometimes his fine eyebrows knitted themselves at the sight of certain cabalistic figures which signified to him possible falls in likely shares of which he was owner. Over the veldt the sun blazed still, though it was getting low in the heavens, and preparing for that sudden leap which leaves the southern world in darkness; while the sound of a distant thud, thud, spoke of crushing-engines at work, and of sweating Kafir boys grinding at their daily toil. There was a general chirping and humming and whirring amongst the branches of the mimosa thorn in the near vicinity of the hut, where the birds and insects indicated their preparations for the journey into night. A large moon, as yet only faintly outlined against the deepening blue of

the sky, was rising like an apparition over the thatched roof of the camp; and there was a faint smell in the air of cooking buck, issuing from the quarter where an evening meal was undergoing preparation at the hands of a Kafir.

Garrick Maitland read till his pipe went out, and then went to superintend the final arrangements for supper. He was not alone out there with the blacks and Boers; but his chums were all at the Battery just now, and he was "keeping house," in conjunction with the office of meal-purveyor. He had supplied the larder with his gun earlier in the day, and now went to see that the "stamped mealies" were properly cooked, and everything ordered to prevent cussing and swearing when the rest of the household returned. When he came back again to his pipe and his seat, looking more than a little warm and equally cross, he caught sight of an object crossing the veldt to the left, and arrested himself in the act of refilling, to watch the approach of the boy who had been sent to fetch the mails.

The mails! Who can fully imagine what the word means to the exiled? Pretty nearly everything that is sweet and smacks of civilisa-

tion probably. Garrick took the letters wordlessly (he would not have dreamt of a word of thanks to a native), and, after looking them over, said "Damn!" so heartily that if it were not part of a Kafir's creed to be astonished at nothing, he might have startled the youth who awaited orders. Then he thrust the letters into his pocket, and dawdled back to the house with the indifference of a Piccadilly dandy and his crossness doubly accentuated.

For the fact of it was, the young fellow was just about as miserable as he could well be. Three months ago, or a little less, he had written the letter to Veronica Grace, with which we are already acquainted, and nearly a month ago had come her answer, which had been a terrible blow in the face to him. It is always pretty rough upon a fellow who has made up his mind that a girl loves him, and is only waiting for him to ask formally for her hand, when the lady turns her back upon him with a decided no. How much more so when the wooer is some thousands of miles away from her and can neither reason with her nor try the effects of tender cajolery; when he cannot even flirt with another woman to bring her to her senses! And the case was aggravated in Gar-

rick's case by these disadvantages, by his lonely position and not too luxurious life.

Therefore, he chafed unutterably at his damnable luck, as he called it; and the only interest he had left in life for some weeks was to watch for the mails on the chance of another letter from Veronica contradicting the first (a contingency he felt was possible from his knowledge of her character), or, failing that, some news of her from outside gossip. The letters that the mail had brought this particular evening were all for his colleagues but one, and that exception he recognised as being in the handwriting of an old tutor of his who wrote to him occasionally.

It was a scholarly hand, and as Garrick's correspondents were mostly either business men or female cousins and aunts, he naturally concluded this to be from "old Sinclair." So he did not trouble to open it at once, in his disappointment, and was ungrateful enough to utter the little word mentioned above, being a man, and, as we all know, on that account having no gift of inquisitiveness.

By and by the other men trooped in. There were five of them, and they were all more or less grimy, hot, and blasphemous; but

this was nothing unusual. A meal restored their tranquillity wonderfully, and a smoke finished the business. By seven o'clock they were all as happy and amiable as cows in clover. The short after-glow of the sun had disappeared long before, and the lamp shone upon their empty plates and peaceful visages.

Then Garrick drew out the letters and handed them round to their respective owners.

"Any news yourself, old boy?" asked one, less selfishly absorbed than the others, as he broke his seal.

"Yes; one letter from old Sinclair. I haven't opened it yet."

"Not from *she* then?" The fellow knew something about Veronica, though not the entire fact.

"Not from *she*. I expected a letter from the Cape, but it hasn't come."

"Oh, drop it, Maitland! You are not seriously thinking of enlisting."

"By Gad, I am. I'm d——d sick of this life. Once in the Rifles, and there would be always some sport in the form of a row, and a chance of potting a Boer, which would be worth living for."

He rose and fished out a coat from a dark

corner. The evenings were chilly at this time of the year, and he had been sitting, unlike the rest, in his shirt-sleeves till now. Across the thick smoke from the pungent and disagreeable Boer tobacco they were smoking, which gathered round the lamp, he saw contentment spread itself over the faces of his companions, and observed the sentimental expression which is the shade generally cast by home letters. One fellow, who had not received a letter, was strumming a banjo and pretending he didn't care.

It was no idle threat of Maitland's that he intended to join the Cape Mounted Rifles. He had written to the colonel, and was expecting an answer daily. Vera's letter had hit him harder than he would once have believed possible. As a matter of fact, he was much more sure that he was in love with her now than he had been before her answer to his letter came. Now he felt that he had only lived to marry Vera, and that there was nothing left for him to do but turn soldier, since she had thrown him over, prospects and all! He had never dreamt of proposing to her until his income justified the responsibility, and defied any prospect of ultimate self-sacrifice on his part.

He had convinced himself, with the usual confused reasoning of selfish bachelordom, that he had been extremely honourable in maintaining a discreet silence with her as to the exact state of his feelings, although at the same time trying with all his might to gauge hers. It is fair to say it never occurred to him that his own dread of living uncomfortably and bearing responsibility had had anything to do with his waiting attitude; and if such a thought had arisen, he would have promptly quenched it. Out here he could rough it; but he was not going to live in a paltry house, in a paltry way, on paltry means, in England, which represented to him a paradise of enjoyment and luxury. Of course, he was not going to drag Vera or any other girl down to penury, he said to himself, with all the inward inflation of the young person who once sat in an angle with confectionery. But at the back of this was the inward knowledge that Garrick Maitland, miner and "prospector," would never be able to exist in England without his club, his horses, and the entertainment of his friends royally—Vera or no Vera. And he never dreamt of married life out of England for one moment.

The "boy" came in and cleared off the supper things. He was a tall black Kafir, some twenty-five years of age, with a comparatively intelligent face, and the usual deep, musical voice. They all treated him like a brute, of course, but not unkindly; and being sworn at meant nothing to him. It was such an everyday occurrence, that it never even hurried him.

"Voeksak—suka, you skillum, d—n you!" growled the man with the banjo, as the "boy," whom they called Pick, got in his way to pass with some plates. A mixture of Boer and Kafir is no uncommon combination.

"Longele, boss" (all right, sir), grinned the native cheerfully, as if at a pleasant compliment, disappearing at the same time into other regions with a clatter.

Garrick brushed a flying stinger from his face, and said irritably—

"You've jumped my pouch, as usual, Green. Why the devil can't you find your own?"

Green was looking provokingly happy over a letter from his sweetheart, which was certainly some excuse for Garrick's ill-temper. The only answer, therefore, to his outburst

was a sweet smile. Then he turned on the banjoist—

“Can’t you take yourself off somewhere with that beastly row?” he asked. “The jackals would enjoy it, I am sure; it’s so like their own infernal howling.”

“Keep your hair on, old fellow. You’re very kind; but I prefer my present quarters. ‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast;’ and I’ll hope to soothe yours, with time and patience.”

“Oh, patience be”—

“Why don’t you read your own letter instead of kicking up a shindy about nothing, Maitland, my dear?” asked the man called Green, who was in a lovely temper after his letter, and looked the picture of beatitude.

Garrick drew out the epistle, yawned, and opened it leisurely. Perhaps he might as well read it, he reflected. In a minute his face changed, and he flung out a long and accentuated oath.

“Well, I am ——.”

“What is it? Somebody left you a fortune?”

It was Green who thus interrogated him

with friendly interest. But he got no answer. In a minute—

“I’m going outside ; it’s so cursedly hot in here,” said Garrick in a strange voice, and he left the wondering assembly abruptly. It was a very rare thing for them to wander about outside after the sun was set. In the first place, it was so cold at this time of the year ; and in the second place, they were usually too tired and lazy.

The letter was from a girl, to Garrick’s immense astonishment,—for he looked at the signature first,—and ran as follows :—

“DEAR MR. MAITLAND,—You don’t know me ; but I daresay you may have heard of me. I am Vera Grace’s great friend, and I am writing to ask you not to take any notice of a letter she has written you. I know something about *it*, and a great deal about her. She loves you ; and I believe, if you come home, she will be able to explain herself to you. She is thoroughly miserable now, and accuses herself of sins that she is really innocent of. You mustn’t believe her. She is morbid and unstrung lately. Please do not let her know I have written ; and oh, do forgive her, and

come home *at once*. She is such a dear, dear girl; and I am so anxious about her future.—
Yours very sincerely, SYLVIA GRANT."

"God bless Sylvia Grant!" ejaculated the young man, with a sudden spark in his eyes, and a lip that quivered under his yellow moustache. The hot red blood rushed to his bronzed face, and he felt half-ashamed of the throb in his pulses. "What a jolly little girl she must be to write like that!" he reflected; "and what the deuce does Vera mean by it?" (*it* referring to her conduct presumably). Then he pulled-himself together, and knocked the dead ashes out of his pipe.

"Well?" asked the others as he entered.

"Don't ask any impertinent questions," he said, with that faint lisp and nervous, half-girlish laugh which made him so incongruous in his masculine strength and six feet of bone and muscle. "Circumstances have decided that I start for the Cape on Saturday, *en route* for England."

"For England! The devil! Then you've heard"—

"Yes; I'm wanted. Where's that con-

founded boy? I want some more coffee. Then I'm going to turn in."

"How about the Cape Rifles?" inquired Green innocently.

"Go to Jericho," was the reply. And the others only looked at one another foxily and smiled. One said, when Garrick was not listening—

"Cunning old beggar! said it was from his old tutor, and it was from a girl all the time!"

"Not it," said the one called Green; "he'd have opened it long before if it had been." He spoke from the inward conviction of his private experience; and the others laughed.

"You'll never bottom Maitland. He's 'cute as a wagon-load of monkeys," was the oracular conclusion of the banjoist; and after this the discussion was adjourned.

CHAPTER XI.

“Steeped in sentiment as she lies, spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Ages.”—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

THE Michaelmas term was drawing to its close, and the students at Somerville awaited their various examinations with feverish anxiety and excitement, such as no amount of “teas” and “cocoas” could quell. Sylvia Grant was one of the worst affected, for, being her first term, it was likewise her first trial of strength, and she feared it terribly.

At the thought of that ordeal the blood would seem to surge up to her head, and then back into its proper channels, taking with it all the nerve nourishment her spirit required, and making her feel lax and limp as a wax doll. Hers was the kind of organism that is intensely nervous without being imaginative; consequently, when she did set herself beforehand to calculate possibilities of experience,

the effect was devastating upon her equilibrium. Women who, like Vera, live ever in an atmosphere of nerve-thrills, conjured up by their own abnormal phantasy, cannot know the gigantic force of a nervous dread inflicted by a healthy but over-strung consciousness.

Sylvia's mental disturbance was telling upon her more than she knew. She had tried to force into a couple of months an amount of reading that could only have been successfully grappled with in double or treble the time, with the usual results—confusion and exhaustion.

Now she sat at the window of her pretty little room with a paper of symbols before her that a few weeks ago would have given her little trouble. But the fresh matter she had accumulated was all jumbled up in her pretty head with other matter which distracted, and she wrung her hands in despair over her knitted brows. Here was a problem she couldn't do, and probably next Friday, in Prelim., she would have others like it, but thrice as difficult; while Noel Gordon was tormenting her to marry him at once, and would smile pityingly but contentedly if she failed. It was maddening!

And this was not the last of her distractions. There was Vera on her mind—Vera, who had come to Oxford with her, and (with an eye to freedom) taken rooms overlooking Magdalen Grove. She too was supposed to be reading for Schools, at the same time that she was working at her new tale, “*Fractions*.” But how much reading and how much work did she accomplish? Whenever Sylvia saw her, it was—“Sylvia, I am going on the lower river with the Maxwells;” or, “There is an organ recital at Christ Church, which I must hear;” and lately, with her unfortunate propensity for attracting callowness, Vera had had a good deal of her time wasted by a youth named Lascelles. He was a certain lord by courtesy, rather vacuous, strong of oar, and feeble of wit. There was no reasoning with Vera.

“He’s ever such a nice boy, Sylvia dear,” she had said airily, when the Somerville girl had attempted an onslaught upon the new protégé; “just the kind I like; not too knowing, and thick in the muscle. I like ’em of that metal, you know. And really he has very nice manners.”

It was useless to argue, Sylvia felt, so she

let the subject drop. But in spite of assuring herself that Vera's vagaries were of no importance to her, she felt irritated by her friend's deliberate waste of herself, her time, and her talent.

Therefore, when Vera entered, as she did at the very moment little Sylvia was throbbing over the mathematical problems before-mentioned, Sylvia did not rise with any pleasure to greet her. She represented a more tiresome problem than Euclid was capable of.

"What do I care about 'sported oak' when I want to see my Sylvia?" cried the intruder, embracing the student affectionately. "It is a disgrace to humanity, Sylvia, that you should grind like this, with your cheeks getting paler and paler, and your eyes dropping into your head!"

"Heaven forefend?" ejaculated Sylvia piously. "Keep your imagination for '*Fractions*,' Vera, and don't waste it on inventing mendacious statements about me. I am perfectly well."

"Fit as a fiddle," said Vera, laughing.

"If that is the latest *morceau* of slang from the Lascellian repertoire, I am not impressed

by it," said Sylvia severely. She did not like Vera's state of merry content.

"Dear heart, how it does loathe that poor boy! But, really, Syllie, I've come to ask your advice. Can you give me a little consideration, or am I disturbing of equations?"

"Oh, I can't work any more to-day; the fog has got into my head. Talk away. What have you been doing since Sunday?"

"On the loose, dear. I have scarcely written or read a line. In fact, I've given up the idea of taking Prelim. this term. I'm too unsettled, and events tend to make me more so."

"What do you mean? Surely" — she flushed, and went on excitedly—"you have not heard again from Garrick Maitland?"

"No."

"Nor Captain Dalton?"

The brooding fear in the girl's heart was that Vera would marry this man, whom she detested cordially, before an answer came to a certain letter she had written to Africa.

"Captain Dalton! No." Surprise could not have been less feigned than Vera's. She had no idea what was passing in her friend's mind. "Not quite that. In the first place, what should he write to me about?"

“To ask you to marry him, I suppose.”

“Never. He will never do that. A man does not care to have his conscience outside, staring him in the face.” She laughed. “Besides, what difference would it make if he did? I would die rather than accept him, for the reason I have stated. You ought to know that much,” she ended reproachfully. All the life and light had gone out of her face by magic. The spot on her conscience was very sore still, though she salved memory by activity.

“I do not see why he should not ask you,” persisted Sylvia. “He can’t have much conscience, and he must like you very much.”

“That is just where you mistake, dear. He never cared for me.”

“Then why”— began Sylvia, puzzled as usual.

“Because of something you can’t understand, dear daisy girl, and I can’t either, though I know it by touch. Can you imagine that one could love the clasp of a hand belonging to a man one feared and despised? No, of course not. *I can.*”

“Oh, how mad you are! What nonsense

you talk ! I wish you were more like other people, Vera ! ”

“ I am exactly like other people ; only that the great majority is a tongueless entity so far as expressing its sensations is concerned. That’s all. ”

“ Was that what you came to tell me ? ”

“ No. I had almost forgotten. You know I had always a passion for soldiers, Sylvia ; and now, what do you think ? It has given place to a mania for lords ! ”

Sylvia clouded more and more. She knew what was coming.

“ All that rubbish means, I suppose, that Lord Lascelles is in the ascendant just now. ”

“ Yes. It is so nice to talk to you, dear Sylvia ; your prescience forestalls all I have to say, nearly. ”

“ Can’t you be serious ? Oh, life is too earnest to be treated always as one continual joke, Vera ! ”

“ Do I treat life as one continual joke ? I thought I was all melodrama, not farce ; but there is a very thin line between the two. Speaking collectedly, then—is there not something mysteriously attractive about a title ? ”

“I thought you were superior to such attractions, at all events.”

“Dear, you don’t know me yet. In some moods I am superior to nothing, in others to everything. But you must confess ‘Lady Lascelles’ would look very well on visiting cards, and a coronet become my classic brow.”

“Have you had the chance of becoming Lady Lascelles?” Sylvia was interested.

“*Je l’ai!* In a flash I saw a long regiment of persons who have turned up the physical and mental nose at me in past days, all wallowing dejectedly in the dust of regret behind me, whilst I sweep on unheeding. Charming picture!”

They both laughed. Sylvia caught the tone of self-scorn in the jest, and said no more.

“But, despite the alluring prospect, I said ‘No,’ and now I’ve come to know whether I’ve done well?”

Sylvia threw herself upon her unhesitatingly.

“You dear thing! of course you have. What a shame of me to doubt you! You could not marry a shell of a man like that,—‘empty sheath of a man,’ as Browning says.

Why, he is nearly ten years your junior, and under age."

"Oh, that wouldn't matter! It isn't that," said Vera serenely, in the strength of her wonderful power to charm. I should not be afraid to marry a man ten years my junior. It is because I don't like him to touch me, Sylvia. The other night he kissed my hand (it was after I left you at the Union debate), and I felt as if I must kill him on the spot and trample on his body, somehow. It was a most uncivilised inclination he aroused in me. Poor boy! and I'm so fond of him."

A tone of mild regret pervaded this last remark, and Sylvia could only cry despairingly—

"Oh, Vera! you are worse than algebra, Euclid, and arithmetic rolled into one! Is there *no* clue to you?"

CHAPTER XII.

“I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed !”

SHELLEY.

THAT very week events came thickly upon the two of them, with the startling importance which always attends the unexpected.

Two days after Vera had gone to Sylvia's room to make confession, she was coming out of the Camera hurriedly, when it was dusk, and ran against a man at the corner of Catherine Street. She had been skimming Kant and Hegel for a couple of hours, till her brain reeled from fertilisation of the ideas in it, and she saw nothing outside herself for some minutes. In “*Fractions*” she was introducing a superficial character who liked to be thought cognisant of mental science, and she had been reading for the necessary technical vocabulary, under pretence of studying for her “coach.” But the sense of these thinkers' words had carried her beyond her purpose, into fields of

metaphysics, which had always a powerful attraction for her. Therefore she was very far away from the crumbling, hoary walls of the holy city, and from matter generally, when she was brought back to Oxford by sudden contact with a fellow human, which pulled her up sharply under a gas-lamp.

“I beg your pardon—very sorry really—Miss Grace! is it you?”

She saw the speaker was Noel Gordon, and was relieved; for, with all her independence of character, she intensely dreaded submitting herself to a chance of careless impertinence from any loafing undergraduate.

“I am so glad to see you,” she said, putting out her hand. “I’ve been to the Radcliffe to read, and the spirit of me had cut the material for a time, while I was with Kant and Hegel in the Shades. So I did not see where I was going. Would it be very hard to learn German?”

“Why German? That you may read the Teutonic philosophers in their own not-to-be-easily-mastered-and-ever-to-be-regretted tongue, I suppose?” said the professor of classics, with the quiet scorn of a man who looks upon Latin and Greek as the only fit

vehicles for civilised thought. He turned and walked beside her as he spoke.

“Yes—once learn the instrument and the music is easy to understand. But life is so short—original information gratis—and I know scarcely anything yet.”

“That is what we all feel,” said Gordon politely.

He became aware that he had something to say to her, but did not know how to begin. For a few seconds they trod in silence that glorious “High,” which the ghosts of history dispute with the living pedestrian, making their presence felt impalpably upon some inner sense—and which the glow of mediæval romance hallows and illuminates. Then Gordon plunged—

“Have you seen Sylvia lately? I am getting anxious about her.”

“I’m not surprised. I believe that girl will fall to pieces through sheer hard work. Why don’t you stop it?” She looked up at him.

He laughed a little savagely as he answered—

“That is out of my power. Can you not use your influence? I am convinced she is

injuring her health, and that Mrs. Grant will be quite shocked when she sees her so white and thin."

"I cannot think why she was so determined to take Latin and Greek for her languages," said Vera. "She knew nothing about them, and it was absurd to think she could do anything with them in such a short time. I find it impossible to get through with French and Latin, both of which I know a little. But Sylvia knew less even than I of Latin, and no Greek worth speaking of. Whereas she could have taken French or German easily."

Gordon did not answer. Probably he was thinking he knew the reason why Sylvia wanted most of all to master classics; and if Vera had reflected, she would have known too.

They had reached Vera's rooms now, and she stood at the door of the house facing him.

"May I come in?" he asked suddenly, instead of saying good-bye. "That is a cool request, I know, but I want to talk to you about several things, if you can spare me a few minutes of your time."

She was verily astonished, never having

had much intercourse with this sapient young "coach," whom she fancied did not altogether approve of her as a companion to Sylvia. For him to outrage Mrs. Grundy, by inviting himself to call upon her, was undoubtedly surprising. She bade him welcome heartily enough, though, and led the way into her sitting-room.

It was tiny, with a very low roof and a funny little square window with flowers growing on a shelf outside, or rather apologies for flowers, of an evergreen nature. In the middle of the apartment was a small square table, on which stood a lamp of solid, unbeautiful workmanship, as yet unlighted. In one corner was a bookshelf fairly well stocked with literature of rather a miscellaneous description ; where Rossetti shouldered Mill, and Marion Crawford, Darwin, O. W. Holmes, and Ruskin, together with Aristotle and Ouida, turned backs on each other. An old-fashioned cottage piano stood flat against the wall by the door, and ran the corner of its keyboard into you when you entered. There was not room for a chair between it and the table, unless that article of furniture was pushed close to the window ; and the cosy little sofa (of horse-

hair, it is true, but deep, low, and “comfy”) lay so near to it on the left-hand side that you could not pass without a squeeze. A diminutive fire was burning, on which a little kettle sang merrily, and upon one half of the table tea was set for one. The other half was covered with books and papers in suggestive confusion.

Taking off her hat as she entered, a large feathered felt of most becoming shape, and pushing up her hair with both hands, she seated herself by the table, and, leaning both arms upon it, looked across at Gordon, who had deposited himself on the sofa, and waited for him to begin. But first she asked—Would he have tea with her? No, many thanks; he had but a few minutes to spare, and would not keep her from her meal long. She looked at him, her smiling lips parted with interest, and thought how nice he looked. What a strong, clean-cut face and what earnest eyes he had! Lucky Sylvia!

“It is not only of Sylvia I am going to speak,” he said, abruptly and awkwardly—“but of yourself.”

“Of myself!” she echoed, raising her level brows in surprise. “Now that is astonishing. Fire away!”

She had a curious fancy for slang, and with her low, caressing, and purely feminine voice such masculine phrases had a strangely incongruous ring, that rather attracted when it did not shock people.

“When I introduced Lord Lascelles to you, Miss Grace,”—he dived at once,—“I did not suspect you of turning his not too brilliant head and ‘ploughing’ all his chances of a pass. It is too bad.”

He spoke with a slight smile curling his lips, but his eyes were serious as ever—more serious than ever.

“Have I reduced him to the plough? Who says so? Please explain.” She lowered her eyes and tried to hide the upward turn of her mouth.

“Oh, I know all about it. The man who has the misfortune to coach a youth like that in classics does not feel altogether cordial to any one or anything that distracts the said youth’s attention from the matter in hand. It is a colossal business to get anything at all into that head of his, even when he is really trying hard. What then must it be when his wits—or what he calls his wits—are wool-gathering?”

“It must be awful,” Vera admitted candidly. “But what has that to do with me?”

“You know best. I hear rumours. I see the young man *distrain*, obviously in love. The ‘gingerbread rabbit expression’ comes on too often to pass unnoted. It is true, isn’t it, that he is your shadow? I want a sincere answer.”

“To be quite sincere, then, for the moment, —yes, I think he is.”

Vera looked straight at him with a suspicion of defiance in her tone.

“Thanks. I thought so. And his parents know too, goodness knows how! I have had a letter from his mother, fearful of entanglements, and her dear boy’s susceptible temperament. Won’t you let him off?”

It was the wrong expression to have used.

“What do you mean?” Her voice rose imperiously. “Let him off! Have I power to control him? Do you think I hold him against his will?”

“Will!” said Gordon, with a short laugh; “do you really suppose such an invertebrate has a *will*?”

But Vera was angry now. There was too

much truth in his allegation for it to be palatable.

“Is the Countess of Sarpenden afraid I shall marry her son?” she asked scornfully.

“To tell the plain truth, I think she is.”

“And then there would be ‘ructions,’ I suppose?”

“I don’t think you would find things made very pleasant for you, certainly.”

“Why, what would they do?” Vera asked, with a quick light in her dark eyes.

“I expect the whole family would make itself extremely disagreeable, and say very unflattering things. You would be called artful, designing, and everything that is disreputable.”

“That settles it. I will marry Lord Lascelles. I want a little fresh excitement. I have always thought I should like opposition to my marriage. What fun! Yes; I will marry the fledgling, and show the Earl and Countess the true ‘grit’ I am made of. I suppose they can’t disinherit him?”

“You will have to wait till he is of age, you know,” said Gordon, not taking her seriously.

“Of course. It will be easy enough to

hold him till then if there is contradiction, which love feeds on. That will complete arrangements.”

“You might marry something better than a fledgling,” said Gordon, with a sudden realisation of her magnetic force, as she stood there flushing and paling, with uncanny light in her strangely-coloured eyes, and deep voice vibrating.

“You are wrong. I might not. I never attract the best. I am not good enough, or bad enough, or pretty enough, or ugly enough, or silly enough, or clever enough. Besides, it would be better to marry a man one had not idealised, for fear of disappointment.”

“How about his disappointment, should he idealise you?” asked Gordon, wanting to go, yet unable to tear himself from her presence.

“Oh, there is no fear of that with our fledgling. So long as I am jolly, and domineer over him, and dress well, he will be satisfied.”

“You do not take into consideration that he is only a half-developed man.”

“I will develop him.”

“You are not in earnest, Miss Grace?” He began at last to take alarm.

“I am quite in earnest.”

“I will not believe it.”

“You will see.”

“I don’t want to cease to respect you.”

“Have you ever respected me? This is news!”

At this moment, her landlady, with an eye, possibly, to propriety, tapped at the door, and asked Vera whether she would not have her tea, for which she had provided some delicacy. Gordon rose to go.

“I feel sure you cannot mean what you have said,” he declared, on taking leave. “You would have ceaseless regrets, and—well, I know you have too much pride and self-respect to place yourself in an equivocal position. Thank you for granting me this little interview, and forgive my presumption in speaking to you of this matter. Good-night.”

“Good-night. Don’t tumble down the ladder,” she called after him, as he stumbled down the crooked little staircase in the dark. Then she came back, threw herself full length on the couch, and laughed mirthlessly.

“Yes, I’ll marry him,” she said to herself. “He is a mere metazoon, lacking a soul to be hurt by me, and his name will give my designs some advantage. Money and leisure are useful too; power lies behind the rubbish and sham of society conditions. If I cannot give it to Garrick, why should I care who is master of the husk of me? And I could not marry Garrick. I could not bear his disappointment. I dare not risk it. Neither have I any right to be happy in that way. No; my remorse would eat me up if I did not carry some kind of barbed instrument inside my garments next my skin. So I must make the best of things, and congratulate myself on risking no fall of ideals. Thus I marry Lascelles as a safe investment; no hazard of prize or blank—just a business barter.”

She ate very little, but drank tea furiously. Her face burnt and her eyes shone. “Now to write to him,” she murmured to herself. The papers were pushed aside to make room for her writing-case.

“MY DEAR LORD LASCELLES,” she wrote, “I have changed my mind, and I think if you ask me again, I may conclude to marry you.

I feel honoured by your proposal, and am afraid I treated it too abruptly, but I was so surprised by it. Don't expect too much from me. You know I wade in ink. Of course I can't marry you until you are of age, and expect you will find some opposition in your family. If it should be very strong, you must give me up" (artful touch).—"Yours very truly,
VERONICA GRACE."

"'Yours very falsely,' it ought to be," she reflected cynically. "Poor boy, what a shame it is! and how I loathe him! Probably I shan't marry him at all. But yes, I will, if I possibly can. Hundreds of women marry men they don't care for; it can't be very hard when once the will is set like an alarm, to run down only when the time for escape is over."

She could not settle down to her papers again. Kant and Hegel, with the terminology of metaphysics, had flown far into the background of her thoughts. She was all actuality now, feeling life racing in her veins as it seems to do in moments of excitement, and her chords were all strung up to the strange music of emotional disorder.

Opening the cracked piano, she sailed out

into song as a refuge from her confused meditations. It was a passionate melody that came to her, with a quaint minor refrain ; some old, old words were wedded to it, and its very pathos was half-humorous :

“Love hath no ruth.
His darts full sore with smarts endure,
Poisoned in sooth. Death cometh to cure.
Love hath no ruth.”

The last two notes, with the wailing sound of a whole tone between them, died away on her lips, as the door was burst open unceremoniously, and Sylvia entered.

It seemed such an absolutely impossible thing for her to be there at that time in the evening, that Vera could only stare at her in amazement.

“O Vera !” she cried breathlessly, then hesitated. “Don’t be frightened, dear ! I am not mad, and there is no cause for alarm. I mean,”—as she saw her friend getting paler, with eyes into which terror grew,—“it is only that I have had a cablegram,—such an unusual thing, you know,—and I thought I must come to you at once.” She paused, and drew a long breath.

“It is you who seem alarmed,” said Vera,

putting her upon a seat. "Now tell me quietly what it is, and how you managed to get here at such an hour?"

"Oh, I told Miss Marsden it was important, and she sent a maid with me. We came in a fly. I had to come at once. Now, be calm, Vera, darling, for I bring bad news."

Bad it must be, Vera knew from her friend's face.

"For me?" she cried; "for me? What is it? what is it, Sylvia?" She did not know she was reiterating words in a choked voice.

"It is from Madeira—read it." She thrust the official white paper into Vera's hands, which had begun to tremble fearfully. She drew nearer the lamp and read—

"From GARRICK MAITLAND, *Royal London,*
Funchal, Madeira,

TO

"MISS SYLVIA GRANT, Somerville, Oxford.

"*Dying on way home. Ask Vera to cable.*"

A black shadow danced before her eyes, over her sight, and for a few seconds she saw nothing. Then her will seemed to give way, and she began to laugh, then to cry, feebly,

stricken with the curse of her sex—hysterics. Water was fetched, and brandy. She heard Sylvia's voice at a distance trying to calm her, and bits of sentences were floating about in her consciousness.

“No doubt much exaggerated. Very wise to cable to me, so as to lose no time, as he did not know where you might be—must be conscious, and not so ill as he thinks—Vera must be strong and face the trouble—nothing so bad when you look it full in the face—overstrung—now leave off, or I shall be very angry—drink this—be quiet at once, Vera, or I leave you.”

Suddenly the possession ceased; by a violent effort the possessed conquered it, and became calm and self-controlled. She rose and pushed back her hair, which had fallen loose in her excitement.

“Will you get me a time-table, Mrs. Meason?” she asked of her landlady; then to Sylvia, “Do you think I can go soon?”

“Go where?” inquired Sylvia, bewildered.

“To Madeira. There may be time to see him. I cannot cable until to-morrow; it will be too late to-night, I suppose? But I must go at once to London.”

She was so supernaturally calm now, save for an occasional catch in the voice, that Sylvia felt even more frightened than before.

“You can’t go to London to-night, Vera,” she said.

“Yes, I must. I tell you I *must*, Sylvia. Don’t talk.” She caught sight of the note addressed to Lord Lascelles lying on the table, and tore it up minutely. “I had just written to tell Lord Lascelles I would marry him,” she said, with a strange relish for ironical contrast in the midst of her pain. “What do you think of that, Sylvia?”

They were waiting for Mrs. Meason to appear with the time-table.

“You cannot mean it!” said Sylvia, shocked as her lover had been. “You told me you had refused him.”

“I changed my mind. I decided to marry him—with Garry dying at Madeira. What an exquisitely absurd farce life is! Garry dying, and I playing at love-making with a fledgling, a nonentity—and Garry dying!” The tears were in her eyes, and rolling down her face, but her voice was monotonous as she went on: “I have played at cross-purposes with Providence all my miserable, hateful life. I am

tired of it now. I shall never play any more. How I have laughed and made a joke of it all—with Garry dying, perhaps dead! God! And I go on living and laughing, and not to know when Garry is dead! What a fiasco of a world! love a myth, matter triumphant, a coil of cable knowing more than spirit can tell to spirit! What a maddening, bestial, devilish, purposeless, crazy cosmos!”

Her teeth were hard set, while the tears shone in her wide-open eyes and on her cheeks strangely.

“Oh, hush, hush, dear!” said Sylvia, horrified at her blasphemy. “Our own little cosmos or microcosm is what we make it, I have often heard you say, and ‘God’s in His heaven.’”

“If so, He is careful to stay there. I can’t find Him,” answered Vera, with something like a sob in her full stop.

Sylvia had the sense to be silent. One of her best instincts was a recognition of the unfit, and she saw this was no opportunity for a homily. Vera might be a sceptic of orthodox views, but she was naturally neither irreligious nor irreverent. Just now she was off her rails, and of that Sylvia was quite well aware. The

time-table had been found, and a train therein discovered for London in less than an hour. There was no time to be lost. Sylvia, seeing nothing could be said to dissuade Vera from the journey, hastened back to Somerville for her stock of ready money to place at her friend's disposal, while the latter packed a few necessaries for travelling. They only just managed to catch the train, and as Sylvia watched it steam out of the station, with Vera's white face trying to smile farewell from one of the windows, she was conscious of excessive feebleness in her standing capacity.

"Get me some brandy somehow, Matthews," she said quickly to her attendant. "I'm going to sit on that seat a minute. Something has gone wrong with my legs."

When they got back, she slipped something into the girl's hand with the words—

"Many thanks, Matthews, and please don't say a word about my feeling queer at the station. I was a little upset, but am quite well now."

She did not sleep, however. Her tired brain was haunted by Vera's anguished face, with the dew lying in those glittering open eyes. All through the night, in the midst of

a blurred jumble of Greek and Latin declensions, algebraical symbols, and geometrical figures, she heard the monotonous voice chanting, "Miserable, crazy cosmos—Garry dying," over and over again. And above it all, like the ringing of a strange bell, would come the words she had heard Vera singing when she had entered her room, the wailing shred of melody clinging despite her inability to remember its context—"Love hath no ruth."

CHAPTER XIII.

“She loves him ; for her infinite soul is Love,
And he her lode-star.”

ROSSETTI.

THERE was a stir in the North Writing School, and a cry for water. One of the students under examination had fainted over her paper, and there was a general sense of pity mixed with irritation at the interruption, as the slight figure of Sylvia Grant was carried out by one of the examiners. It was some minutes before the lady candidates, thus disturbed, could settle to work again ; and one girl was heard to say, in an audible tone, to another—

“I knew that Sylvia Grant would not hold out. She has no stamina, and never ought to have come up yet.”

At the same time poor Sylvia lay in the corridor, with a death pallor on her thin face, which threw into startling relief the long black lashes lying on her cheeks. Life seemed to

have receded so far that a doctor had to be fetched before animation could be restored, and then it was only a very partial animation.

For with her breath came long sobbing sighs of exhaustion, and wandering remarks, which were so irrelevant as to prove that the mind so long under strain had at last turned in revolt, and neither tongue nor will had any longer control over its vagaries.

Fragments of study and Vera's name came uppermost in the froth of words, when her voice was able to make itself heard ; for Sylvia was very ill, and if she did not actually suffer an attack of brain-fever, at least she was delirious and unconscious for whole hours at a stretch.

Mrs. Grant was telegraphed for, and all her great capacity for nursing was called into requisition by the immediate necessities of her daughter, who, for more than a week, knew her only at intervals. It was an anxious time, and so were the weeks following, during which a weary weakness threatened the very life of the invalid. Right over Christmas Mrs. Grant watched, but still Sylvia could not be moved. By slow degrees, however, good nursing and nourishment spread faint colour in her cheeks,

and put fresh life into the exhausted organism. She had never been physically very strong, and the demands made upon her vitality by the mental cramming she had undergone, assisted by the anxiety and excitement she had felt over Vera, had been altogether too much for her.

The very morning of the examination, when her mind required tranquillising in preparation for the ordeal, a letter had arrived for her from Madeira, which was scarcely calculated to soothe her nerves.

Distraction, in such a case, is said to be beneficial sometimes, but no one has said that actual grief and tears are the most exhilarating aids to mental athletics! And Vera's letter had upset her very much. It should never have been written to reach her when it did; but Vera had forgotten everything else but her own pain and ecstasy, the pathos of which played on the sympathetic girl's emotions terribly.

"I am so happy, so very, very happy, dear Sylvia," it ran. "I never thought there could be such a heaven of joy in this world, as when I first found my love, Garry—now my own for

evermore. To know that he wants only me, and that nothing on earth can take him away from me! For he is going to die, and there is no fear that he can tire of me, or learn how small I am, or be horribly disappointed and disillusioned about me. This is my triumph, my consolation, my weapon against agony. I do not think of the future, though. I live only now. When he is dead I shall be dead too: there will be no me, and you will have another Vera Grace for your friend. All my life has been a mistake, save just this one thing—my love for *him*. It seems hard to have been looking for yourself all your life, and then find only to lose yourself again directly!—only to (really) live a few days! O Sylvia, Sylvia! pray for me that I may not go out of my mind with all this agony of joy and suffering at once. There seems to be a Great Reason somewhere, though I cannot see through all the rush and dust and mist of things. But to be here by Garry's bed soothes and calms me. I try to realise my happiness, and so I write again—*I am happy*. If only I might die too, there would be nothing left to wish for—only pure ecstasy of delight!

VERA."

“I ought to be with her,” Sylvia had sighed to herself, as she finished the letter through blinding tears. “There will be a reaction after all this, and then what will become of my poor Vera?”

She had thrown herself on her knees, praying long and earnestly for her friend in an abandonment of craving and sorrowful compassion.

The result had been a throbbing head and aching eyes. Appetite had gone before, and her cold coffee had been drunk by force. Then came the suffocating silence of the examination room, and a paper of baneful problems. The paper was no harder than usual, but the figures had danced before her eyes like demons. No wonder there was a cry that a student had fainted, and that one girl should say to another, “I thought that Sylvia Grant would not hold out.”

The first thing she desired, when she was well enough to have any wishes, was to hear something of Vera. Her mother told her another letter had come for her during her first weeks of prostration, which she had opened and read. It contained only the news of Garrick Maitland's death, with a few words of resigna-

tion from his *widow*, as she signed herself, Vera Maitland. The few words of incoherent grief contained in the postscript were of such an agitating nature that Mrs. Grant judged well not to say anything to Sylvia about them. She had written a kind letter back to Vera, expressing sympathy, and telling her of Sylvia's illness; addressing it to "Mrs. Garrick Maitland." There was a short note by return, saying Vera was very sorry to hear about dear Sylvia's illness, and that she was returning home almost immediately. That was all. There was no further communication between them, until Sylvia was well enough to write herself, which was after she had been moved home.

During all these weeks Noel Gordon had been wandering dejectedly to and from Somerville, with a more or less worried expression on his face. He was not allowed to see Sylvia for a long time; and when, at last, he was admitted, it was only for a few minutes, in the presence of that vigilant dragon-nurse, her mother. It was lucky for the young men whose mental training was in his charge that the term had ceased, so that his distress of mind could not influence his power over their

usual masterly inactivity of intellect. Probably they would have irritated him beyond endurance at this juncture, and he would have earned their hearty abuse into the bargain. Fortunately, therefore, his mind and temper had time to balance themselves before the Lent term began ; for the fact of Sylvia being out of danger, and gaining strength every day, gave him the necessary stimulation after his loss of holiday and fever of anxiety.

A day or two before he went home, he was permitted to sit by her and talk for nearly a whole hour ; a privilege of which he made the most possible, one may be sure.

“I hope you are not going to score off me, Noel,” she said, with her soft eyes resting on his face in the helpless way so natural to convalescents.

“To score off you !” in injured tones. “My own Sylvia, how can you suggest such a thing ?”

“Because you know you always said I should not get through in Latin and Greek so soon, and I cannot help believing you rather wished I might fail.”

“Indeed you wrong me, dear.”

“But you hope my failure may be a lesson

to me, and warn me against another trial ; isn't that so ? You will back mother and father up in their power and influence to keep me at home in future,—that is, until I marry you,—will you not ?”

Noel was silent. It is not improbable that such guilty thoughts as these had been gathering in his mind. Sylvia went on, with the same gentle smile—

“That is what I mean by saying you triumph. For if you, and my people, and my own miserable physique are all against me, what can I do ?”

He hesitated to speak, then asked, without replying—

“But don't you think yourself that you will be unfit for study for a long time, and that it is natural for us all to be anxious that you do not overdo it again ?”

“That is begging the question,” said Sylvia sternly. “Prisoner at the bar, are you or are you not guilty ?”

“I plead guilty under extenuating circumstances,” he said quickly.

“I do not acknowledge the extenuatingness of the same,” she said ; “and I beg to inform you that I”—

“Mean to defy all laws of mercy, common sense, and authority, do you not?” he asked. “I know well what you are going to say, Sylvia, and I have my answer to it ready.”

“You think I am going to say that I mean to take my First Class in spite of you and all the mothers and fathers in Christendom; and your answer will be, ‘You are as obstinate as a little mule!’”

“Nothing of the kind. My answer is, darling Sylvia, that if you are determined to cram your sweet little head with matter worthy only to stuff the hard and crusty skull of man, I am bound to stand by and help you till all is blue—your dear self included.”

“Do you really mean that, Noel?” the tears springing to her brown eyes.

“I do most assuredly, so don’t torment yourself farther. Whatever you wish is my wish, and I am sworn over to serve you all my life, even if you stick at crabbed books till we are both grey and toothless. I may protest, but that is the most I will permit myself.”

Her moist eyes fell before his ardent look. She was still for a few moments, and then

said, very low, so that he had to bend forward in order to hear her—

“No need even to protest, Noel, for your wish is my wish too.”

He looked at her in bewilderment.

“What do you mean, dearest?” he asked almost with a gasp.

“I mean that I have decided to throw away all chances of setting the Isis on fire, and go in for housekeeping books, and the humdrum, awfully common career of matrimony, by your leave.”

“What? When?—Sylvia, do you mean it?”

“I do mean it, Noel. It is not because I am afraid to try again, or that I think my health would not stand it. I seem to have turned superstitious lately, that’s all.”

He heard her voice break a little, and felt as if his heart would burst with tenderness.

“Why, what is it, darling?” he asked, caressing her hand reverently.

“You know about poor Vera, don’t you?” She collected herself and spoke calmly enough. “What? haven’t you heard of her great trouble? The love of her life has come to her hand in hand with death. My poor

Vera!" Again the treacherous voice failed her.

"No, I had not heard. Who was it, then? Surely not Lascelles"—

"Oh no, no!" Sylvia couldn't help laughing here. "Not that. Hush! A *man*, I believe, though I do not know him. He was coming home from abroad to marry her, and was taken ill of fever at Madeira. Since I have been ill she has written to say he is dead."

Gordon was silent. His masculine logic was trying to put one and one together without leaving one over; and he could not account for Lascelles. Had not Vera Grace said she would marry that adolescent the very last time he had met her? And he had heard nothing about her since.

"Did she really care for the fellow?" he said at length meditatively.

"Of course she did. Would she have gone right off by herself to Madeira to nurse him if she had not loved him dearly?" Sylvia grew quite indignant at his dubious tone.

"I could never understand what Miss Grace would or would not do, under given circumstances, as she was always a complete

sphinx to me," said poor Gordon, feeling slightly crushed.

"That is because you have not studied her as I have. And the moral of it all is— Oh, don't you see the moral, Noel?"

"I must confess I don't—quite—Sylvia dear; but you can explain. I am only a man, you know, and do not understand clearly even the one woman I am making my life-study."

"The moral is—never tempt Providence! Who knows, if I do not marry you soon, what cruel, direful fate may not overtake us, as it has overtaken my poor Vera? Indeed, her sorrow and my illness have warned me, Noel. I thought I was going to die, and I said to myself, If God will only make me well, I will marry Noel at once. It was a solemn vow to sacrifice ambition to love—a sacred vow surely. I did not know it before, till Vera's terrible fate opened my eyes, but I know now that love is before everything, and we must not play with it. We must not play with life either, but take what we can get and be thankful. With Eden I ought to have been satisfied, without the apple of knowledge. Let some less fortunate girl, barred outside Eden, have my apple." She smiled at her con-

clusion, for imagery was not Sylvia's strong point ; and that smile embraced Noel's loving, longing eyes.

“My own precious Sylvia !” he said ; and the scene that followed, being of a sacred and ceremonious character, is unfit to be profaned by the gaze even of the most reverent spectator !

CHAPTER XIV.

“The dead abide with us! Though, stark and cold,
Earth seems to grip them, they are with us still.”

MATHILDE BLIND.

THE few days following that awful one, when Vera felt her lover's hand grow cold and limp over her own, and saw the death-damp on his weary, handsome face, were passed by her in such a lethargy of spirit and body, that the few who had interested themselves in her sad story felt alarmed. These were the English doctor and nurse (the latter a Sister of Mercy, and a good kind woman), and the hostess of the hotel where Garrick had been hurriedly taken when he was shipped off the steamer *Rockingham Castle*. All three were assiduous in their attempts to befriend and console the lonely woman, who lay all day and night stretched on her back, with eyes, fixed and glazed, looking up at the ceiling. She aroused herself to take the refreshment

brought to her at intervals, or rather to play with it, and to write one or two letters. That was all.

The moment she had realised that Garrick was dead, she had fled from the room, and, when asked whether she had any wishes as to the arrangements for his funeral, had replied that she had not, with a shudder, but they had better cable to his uncle, his nearest relative. For her part, she requested not to be consulted in the matter, as she had no further concern with the part of her lover that was left—that part which, she said, was no longer Garrick Maitland. In spite of these words her mind dwelt constantly on the white face with that awful peace and laxness on it; until she had to beg Sister Mercedes to stay by her, feeling a horrible magnetism was drawing her towards the silent room where the simulacrum lay, and dreading lest, in a moment of restless sleep, she might awake to find herself in that fearful presence,—that cruel travesty upon her strong, laughing, fearless Garry!

“Don’t let me go out of this room,” she implored the good sister. “My steps wander to the door when I am awake, and in my

sleep, when will is forceless, what can keep me from that watch-place by the bed ? ”

Her eyes gleamed strangely, and all the practised soothing of the good nurse was required to soothe her nerves.

She had not shed a tear, not even when she read Mrs. Grant's kind letter, which might have opened the channels of that self-pity which is so tear-inducing to us all. In point of fact she was as utterly prostrated in spirit as though her brain had been chloroformed without interrupting the natural functions of her body. When Garrick's uncle arrived, she had to see him, and one of the first questions he asked was, very naturally, as to her title to be called Mrs. Maitland ; thinking perhaps the marriage ceremony had been performed at the sick-bed ; which proceeding he was prepared to stigmatise as utterly absurd and romantic. However, he was more surprised than such news could have made him, to learn that she had no legal right whatever to the name of wife.

“ I am not Mrs. Garrick Maitland by law, but by adoption,” she said, with a wan smile. “ I choose to adopt the name. Have you any objection ? ”

She knew better than to say that by the sacrament of true love she was Garry's wife, and meant to be always his widow ; that they were married in the sight of Heaven, and that the letter was not necessary. In the first place, she felt instinctively that such arguments would only raise a scoff from the hard-headed old gold-magnet before her ; and in the second place her thoughts on the subject were too deep for words to dress in.

He had nothing to say, except that, personally, he had not the slightest objection to her calling herself anything she chose. Of course she knew such a claim on her part was liable to misconception, and that in any case it would not entitle her to any properties the defunct might have left behind. For his part, he could not understand why she desired to take upon herself the dignity of a married woman without any adequate reason. He looked at her sharply as he said this, and added that it was even probable some scandal might attach itself to such a proceeding. But any suggestion or suspicion contained in his words fell short of Vera, who simply listened to him with the leaden expression and fixed eyes of a somnambulist, lending neither re-

sentment nor even interest to his insinuations.

He felt completely baffled by her indifference, and her attitude was so inexplicable to him that he closed the interview as soon as possible. He mentally decided that trouble had turned her head, and she was mad as a hatter; the usual sweeping conclusion of the mediocre robust mind when it meets with anything in another that is not comprehensible to it. He troubled her no more, and merely grunted when he heard afterwards that Garrick had made a will before leaving Cape Town, leaving all his worldly goods to Veronica Grace, Spinster. This amounted to no very great fortune in the opinion of Maitland avuncular, who was a rich man chiefly through shady transactions in finance; but it was a very tolerable sum, possessing a probability of increasing value under certain favourable conditions of the gold market. Garrick had made most of it by his "claims" while he was on Tom Tiddler's ground in the Transvaal, and it was safely invested.

Of this Vera knew nothing until after the funeral, when she began to arouse herself and set about returning home and buying mourn-

ing. She hated black clothes like snakes, and thought clothing in dismal crêpe a barbarous custom, a twaddling pretence. That is to say, she had thought so formerly. Now she realised what a comfort it was that some one should have thought out a symbol for woe, to save sorrowful souls the study of how to express outwardly the utter inward darkness that is a concomitant of bereavement. She wanted the world to see and know she mourned, this inconsistent person, and then she would be left alone with her grief, nor be expected to take part in distractions of any kind. So she bought a black frock and a little widow's cap and veil, taking a melancholy, apathetic sort of pleasure in wearing them, which reached the point of sensation only when she observed the impression made by her appearance on those around her. When she received the intimation by letter of the dowry that had been left to her, she was just beginning to feel the small satisfaction alluded to above, and the news affected her strangely. She was elated yet distressed by it, and in laughter very nearly shed her first tears; for the knowledge that Garrick's one thought had been of her before starting from Africa was rapture, and the thought of

him a torturing stab. It had the effect of arousing her more than anything else could have done, however, and directed her mind into calculations as to how the money must be spent. To do her justice, her immediate intentions were not selfish. She had long held a scheme in her mind which, through lack of means, had been impracticable. Now it recurred to her with force, and took possession of that part which even grief can only exceptionally paralyse. It is only the purely unthinking individual, or the mind extraordinarily capable of seeing but one object at a time,—that is to say, the extremes of dulness and vivid idealisation,—that are so absolutely overborne by sorrow as never to be able to lift their battered branches from the ground where the storm has laid them. Vera was neither. Sylvia had said she was morbid, but she was not morbid in the sense of possessing a brooding imagination. Her emotions were healthily ephemeral, and a week sufficed to make her whole again, with the sap still flowing, though not perhaps so quickly and joyously as before. She would have liked to brood over her sorrow, and never to have recovered from it, which would have satisfied

her craving for romance, but she had a splendid physique, and a mind like a mirror for impressions, so that it was impossible her sad experience should remain painted upon her thoughts irremovably. They would ever be stained by the memory, but not to any degree paralysed or morbidly affected. After, then, this terrible shock of joy and death, she rebounded into a condition of calm and reason unknown in her annals. She wanted, she had always wanted, to make some effort on behalf of those girls who are thrown on their own resources for a living, without adequate training, and who almost invariably choose teaching for their profession. One of her reasons for wishing to qualify herself in the higher education had been—at the first onset—that she might be able to assist such unfortunates, who appealed to her in a much higher degree than the class known generally as “the Poor.”

There was nothing so piteous in her eyes as the sight of a struggling woman, getting on in years without ever having known youth proper, or felt the delightful, irresponsible, indefinite charm of guarded girlhood. A woman usually of refined tastes and keen capabilities of enjoyment, who can afford neither to gratify

taste nor taste gratification! Growing old sadly, with pauperism's hollow eyes threatening her, with no time to cultivate friendship or give loving service for others, becoming more soured and plainer day by day, slaving to keep ahead of the pupils she is gradually losing, and breaking up her health at an age which should be the very prime of her life,—the governess, worst-paid and hardest-working of all labourers, sinks slowly into the oblivion that is her sole refuge! So concluded Vera, from her personal knowledge of the species, which had been extensive from her middle-class point of view, and she had early formed an ideal plan for the aid of these dreary-lived women.

Briefly stated, her ideal scheme had been something like this: That a college should be founded and raised on subscription, which should be free to all young women who could obtain the necessary number of votes, and show cause why they should not pay, or why their parents should not pay, for their education. In this college girls should be trained technically, not only for teaching, but for every kind of employment open to women.

In connection with the college there should

be a guild which all members might join by paying a very small yearly fee, as an assurance of a pension in so many years, should they become out of employment or incapacitated. There were other features which need not be entered upon here. One is worth mentioning. Vera would like to have introduced into her college a "*Frauenstift*," after the fashion of those in Germany, wherein a father, at the birth of a daughter, might insure her a competency should she not marry before a given age. This was Vera's idea, and she had played with it in fancy for several years; now it broke upon her again, wreathed by the radiance with which the thought of Garrick's money invested it. Half transported out of herself as she was now, the notion of putting her wealth and energy into such an enterprise as this would be, filled her with fresh life and charmed her.

Let it be confessed that personal vanity threaded her worthier desires. She felt what a glorious institution it would be with which she would have her name connected in after years; and perhaps she may be forgiven this in consideration of the fact that she anticipated no other personal hereafter. The loving memory of her fellow-creatures was all she hoped

for, and this might be a better way of gaining it than the old dream of literary renown.

The money coming to her as it did just now, when she had lost taste for her own attractive person and took no pleasure in the future, seemed specially designed by fate for this scheme. Strangely, it took such possession of her that, for once in her life, she was self-absorbed and reticent upon the subject. But, after a short visit home, which was a sad one to her by reason of the many questions she was obliged to answer, she returned to her rooms at Oxford, and set to work making known her project.

The abnormal settlement of all her faculties to one end surprised every one, most of all herself. She felt that the storm and stress of life was over, that excitement no longer attracted her, and that, in short, the most vivid of all possible sensations—love and parting—had drained the old passion for nerve experiment out of her.

Consequently, she did good work for once. For once she studied with persistence and wrote with true religious fervour; the only way to write stuff that can verily touch or benefit the reader. She resorted to pen, ink,

and paper as some folk take to drink or opium in affliction, to drown sorrow, and gave herself to useful but uncongenial subjects as some others have taken to the scourge. Only that in all she did a better object than her own comfort was combined—the beatification of life for some of her fellow-women.

Her first action was to write and tell Sylvia all her plans, not forgetting one which concerned the girl herself, namely, that, should the college ever be floated, Noel Gordon should be offered the post of Principal. Sylvia was delighted with it all, and wrote back telling Vera of her change of mind regarding her University career, which Vera was not sorry, on the whole, to hear. The two friends were, as usual, in full sympathy with each other. There was that warm affection between them that some people think can only exist between man and woman, but which may certainly often be found between two such opposite characters as those of Vera and Sylvia, where each supplies something to the other. So life sprang back to them both, after having gone through crises which necessarily made alterations in their characters; each to each, as if nothing had happened, they clung as before.

And by June a new book was in the press by Mrs. Garrick Maitland (Vera gloried in the fancy of seeing Garry's name borrowing fame from her intellect), in which an ideal Free College for Women was presented in full construction, graphically described and glowingly eulogised, while the characters stood out strongly, virile men and earnest, living women. The story was dramatic, and some of the situations powerfully conceived and presented. It was characterised by a passionate pity for wronged wretchedness and incapacity, and intense sympathetic insight into the impulses and motives of womankind, in its noblest and meanest aspects. The authoress launched it forth with a sigh of relief and sad feeling of failure and deprecation, although it had been written in a high state of rapt tension.

"It will not reach," she thought; "the purpose is too obvious. The book is too serious to be read by the many; it will fall flat, and I have put my life-fire into it."

Then she received an invitation to Sylvia's wedding, just as the need for change pressed upon her, and she was beginning to feel a most baleful depression and despair.

CHAPTER XV.

“A wretched thing it were to have our heart
Like a broad highway on a populous street.”

TRENCH.

THE meeting of the two friends a couple of days before the great nuptial event was as joyous as a reunion of lovers. They sat hand in hand, looking at each other and criticising each other in that frank, feminine fashion which, between real friends, is always so kind and partial, so flattering and pleasant. For those you love seldom seem to alter for the worse (with an avalanche of disappointment), and women like to know that loving eyes note a becoming garb or a gathered sweetness of expression.

“You look as if you had been working hard, and are somehow more refined and poetic,” said Sylvia fondly, looking admiringly at the fair-framed face of her friend, which the little white cap crowned softly.

“One could scarcely help gaining in refinement and poetry after five months’ sojourn in Oxford,” said Vera. “Do you know, sweetheart, the longer I stay there, the more I appreciate the magnificent privileges of the place. Every wall affects one like church music, every hoary college speaks straight to all one’s intellect and imagination. I almost feel that it is only necessary to lean against the doors of St. Johns, or Merton, or Oriel, for beautiful thoughts to flow through them out of me into the world—such thoughts as to raise the tone and alter the whole key-note of society!”

“Even the cosmos, the poor old cosmos that you abused?” said Sylvia, smiling.

“The great organism of fire, and space, and motion, and all other illimitable, indefinable word-phantasms, which laughs at our babyish nomenclature! How funny to think one can abuse such infinite sublimity without one’s presumptuous little tongue dropping out! I suppose it is because we are so small that we are not worth noticing. How is it, I wonder, that in misery we see no reason, whilst in happiness everything seems per-

fectly regulated? Absurd may-flies, we humans!"

"But tell me about your book. When will it be reviewed?" demanded Sylvia, with the irrelevance only possible between perfect friends.

"Dear, it is going to be a 'dead frost.' That's theatrical slang, you know, for a frightful failure. During the time I was writing, it appeared to me the most enthralling and thrilling narrative ever given to the public. When I revised it, the characters appeared unnatural, the plot ill-constructed and worse worked-out, the language inadequate. When I came to correct the proofs, I was struck with astonishment that any publisher could be found to bring out such utter insipid drivel!"

"That is all fancy, of course."

"I fervently hope so; and that is why I let the thing go on to challenge the verdict of the critics. I have come to the conclusion that an author is absurdly incapable of judging his or her own work. Not only incapable, but fatally and extraordinarily perverse. Merits appear demerits, and *vice versâ*. It is like looking through a photographic lens, when the sitter appears poised on the head,

with the legs where the head should be. You see your own story wrong way up ; a most distorted view, I assure you, and utterly unreliable."

"I have heard so before ; but I do not believe it," Sylvia declared firmly. "Do you mean to tell me that there are not parts of your work that you know, by an invincible instinct, are good ; and that your verdict is never justified by the public ?"

"Now and then, in rare instances. Of course I cannot speak dogmatically yet. I have only published one tale, and in that I can safely affirm every point of mine was danced upon by the critics."

"Critics !" said Sylvia, turning up her little nose. "Abuse is the stock-in-trade of critics ; and they think it indicates sound judgment to revile everything the ordinary reader sets store upon, on the ground that the general reading public is dunder-headed. Probably the most independent of your readers, lacking this affectation, will endorse your own opinion."

"But I'm afraid I side with the critics in their contempt of public dunder-headedness, and would rather trust their judgment than

that of the average reader. I am grateful for outside criticism, Sylvia, having felt the value of it, and my own inability to use it on myself. Self-criticism requires a bigger mind than I own. I have great faith, though, in my publisher, Mr. Gerrould ; he is a scholar as well as a man of business. You would like him."

"And what does he say?"

"That there is power ; and the book will either make a great hit, or none at all. By the latter he means that it may prove only a 'reviewer's book,' as he calls it,—not a popular one."

"H'm ! Is his opinion worth having?"

"Decidedly. He is down on faults in construction, or punctuation, or technical information, like a battering-ram. He seems to take a great interest in me, and has given me dozens of useful hints, good advice, etc. Oh, he's a clever man !"

"Of course he takes an interest in you," said Sylvia, musing. "How much do you like him for all this?"

"Tremendously ! He is just what I want,—a sort of lean-post and strait-waistcoat. We are becoming fast friends."

“What is he like in appearance?”

“Tall and thin, wearing spectacles, getting baldish on the top, pointed beard, deep-set eyes of no colour. No sex.”

“What *do* you mean, Vera?”

“I mean that one forgets he is a man; that’s all. He is very nice, though, really; and has charming manners. I must introduce him to you. But now tell me about the bridesmaids’ frocks.”

(“She ought to marry that publisher man,” thought Sylvia to herself.)

It must be remarked in passing that Vera had declined to be Sylvia’s bridesmaid, because that would have involved giving up her married title. Now she thought she would rather like to be one of the fair swarm, who, in uniform attire of cowslip colour, would trail after a white Sylvia to the altar. The latter plunged into a minute account of dressery and millinery, from which she did not emerge until the dressing-bell rang for dinner.

After dinner the bride’s trousseau was reviewed, and superlative adjectives of commendation called into requisition. There were few people in the house as yet, most of the guests arriving later, so the two friends had a good

time to themselves, and spent a greater part of the night talking until they could talk no longer. Vera poured into Sylvia's sympathetic ear the whole story of Garrick Maitland's death, and her great joy and grief, in language warm from her heart, half incoherent, half poetic,—that style of her own which has been so often commented upon in her writings. She finished by saying that a change had passed over her, as great as when a city is shaken to its foundations by a shock of earthquake. She no longer understood how she could ever have been the Veronica of old. She was building herself up anew, and believed herself now to be shaken free from all the curious taints and impulses of that other self which she seemed to have cast behind her.

“It is as though,” she said solemnly, “my spirit were now shaping my matter, instead of matter shaping ME, the veritable individual me. The only sensation I crave is that of intellectual perception, and the only thing that excites me is to find myself face to face with a sublime thought or a suggestive one. Touch has no longer any power over me. I am free at last; disinfected by love!”

“Don't be too sure,” Sylvia had said dubi-

ously. "You are still a woman, Vera, however spiritual and intellectual crises may have made you. Some man will want to marry you, and then"—

She paused. In her non-analytic, intuitive way she thought she understood Vera pretty well. Perhaps she did. But Vera flew at her in distressful indignation.

"O Sylvia! that you should suggest such a thing—you who know me, and know what I have gone through so recently! After scaling heaven and probing hell, surely you cannot doubt that I have been tried by fire. If any man offered to marry me now, I should look upon him as an insulter!"

And Sylvia only replied to all this hyperbole by saying—

"Yes, dear, I don't doubt it; but you would forgive the insult, and like the man for offering it."

And that was the close of the subject, for it led Vera into such a train of reflection and self-analysis that she wished to talk no more.

CHAPTER XVI.

“Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.”

SHAKESPEARE.

THE day began by being wet, as most July days in England do. From one end of the Ford Grants' house to the other all was excitement and confusion; even the gardeners outside were driven almost wild by contradictory orders. Flowers for the table were, of course, to be all white; then why were other flowers of infinite hues required by first one and then another of the guests and servants? One wanted this, and then didn't want it; or that, and then didn't want that. The whole household and gardenhold ran into each other persistently, and everybody who came down fresh to breakfast wondered why he or she couldn't get the meal in peace, and be waited on as usual. Guests arrived from north, south, east, and west, beginning soon after eleven

o'clock ; and even serene Mrs. Grant contracted a slight pucker on her smooth forehead as surroundings became more and more kaleidoscopic. She was too easy-going a mistress to observe the precision and regularity of a model housewife ; consequently the usual happy-go-lucky freedom of the place degenerated into disorder, as it had done before, in that unfortunate time when measles had broken out upon it.

But a gradual sifting process took place towards two o'clock, the time fixed for the wedding, and the sun graciously bestowed the honour of his rare presence upon the bride, as she stepped forward from the porch in lustrous raiment, artistically designed and picturesquely becoming. There was nothing stiff, but all one even flow of soft shining white, draped loosely and fastened here and there with the traditional orange-flower ; whilst her bunch of sweet-brier, jasmine, mignonette, and white sweet-pea was less funereal than the conventional bouquet.

The bridesmaids were pretty girls ; two cousins (one the sister of Frank Thorold), one sister of the bridegroom, and a friend. Their frocks also were devoid of harsh lines

and seams ; fitting, without having been obviously carved to model corsets. Sylvia, usually so indifferent to the wearing of clothes, had studied this matter well, and adopted a suggestion from Vera that her aim should be not so much fashion or brilliancy as picturesqueness of effect, and the result was undoubtedly successful.

Vera felt undeniably pleased with herself as she took a final view of her person before going downstairs. Her attire was certainly a novel arrangement, as it consisted of a sixteenth-century-fashioned garment, made in soft dull white stuff, and was crowned by a little Mary Stuart black bonnet, from which a long widow's veil was thrown backwards.

Absurd as it was, it suited her admirably, and gave her the sort of out-of-the-way look she desired. That night, after saying good-bye to Sylvia, and shedding abundant tears over the parting, more from excitement than any other feeling,—she kept her tears for such occasions,—Vera changed her gown for dinner with a keener interest and pleasure in her appearance than she had felt since Garrick's death. She had said to herself that she did not want to look nice, and that black made her

look atrociously old and sallow, so she would just wear it. All the same, she did not disdain to have her robe made by first-rate hands, and of a first-rate material; nor did she waste little time over the consideration of it. Consequently, when she saw herself in black velvet, softly shaded round the low neck and minute sleeves with white ostrich feathers, bearing a tiny Stuart cap of black velvet on her blonde hair, she was not at all displeased with the reflection. The whole effect was refined and fanciful; there was light in her eyes, and colour on her cheeks. She bravely resisted a temptation to tone down that vivid colour with chalk, and gained by the denial.

When she entered the drawing-room, it was to find all the other guests talking about her, as she knew by the sudden silence that followed her entrance. With an instinct of posing she arrested herself on the threshold, and looked round to note who observed her. Then some one walked across the room from an opposite corner boldly, and offered his hand. It was Frank Thorold, who was there with his sister.

“I want to congratulate you,” he said abruptly, and somewhat awkwardly. “Your

name and fortune are made now for certain, they say ; although, of course, your name was made before." He stammered, got very red, and backed to let her pass.

Mr. Grant followed suit.

"We are proud to number amongst our guests so distinguished a lady," he said, and he too extended his hand, as he offered her a seat, taking his stand beside her.

Several more people pressed forward with more congratulations. She looked around in amazement. What did it all mean ? Had the whole brood gone mad at once, or were they having a joke with her ?

She was soon enlightened. Her novel had been reviewed in a leading magazine, by an eminent author and critic, so favourably as to leave no doubt as to the position she was henceforth to take in literature. Some one had seen the review, which was only just out, and had been quoting passages from it in order to wile away the uninteresting minutes which elapse before the dinner-hour is pummelled on the gong.

"You could not have told me anything that would please me better. I would rather have his praise than that of half the world !" Vera

exclaimed, when she heard the name of the great critic, with her usual aptitude for extremes. Her eyes flashed with a great radiance; she was elated beyond measure, yet felt as if she could hardly bear the comments which were passed upon her talents and her success. She could not eat at dinner, feeling sick with excitement and emotion, for, mingled with her sense of relief and rapture, was a passionate sadness, that every few moments threatened to choke her. What was it all worth to her, success and adulation, without Garry? It had always been, "This will be something to make him proud of me;" now there was no Garry to be proud or pleased. It was always in such hours as these, all through her life afterwards, when she was lifted from her ordinary plane, that the old agony renewed itself. She came to be afraid of sudden pleasure or keen excitement, from dread of this ache lying at the depth of her spirit, to be stirred up to the surface at any violent sensation.

She tried to talk to her neighbours, and she swallowed Burgundy and champagne in larger doses than ever before, hardly knowing what she was doing, and only wishing to dissolve the lump in her throat and appear at

ease. When dinner was over and dancing began, she felt better, assuming queenly airs. She was not going to dance, oh no! But she did not scorn the attentions of the young men who crowded round her chair, and gazed with admiring eyes upon her variable face in its glow of brilliant colour. The play of quick expression, the upturned chin and smoothly modelled throat, were not lost upon them. She felt again the old intuition that without positive beauty she held the charm and power of beauty, and the knowledge intoxicated her probably more than it ever could have done a perfectly beautiful woman, because of the consciousness that she herself, and not the face she was born with, wielded the power.

All the evening she laughed and talked and played the heartless, entrancing, puzzling, diverting society woman, with a masterly technique which surpassed anything she had ever attempted. The girls present could not understand why their partners preferred listening to Mrs. Maitland to dancing with them, not having yet learned the secret of conscious power in a woman of tact, who knows the exact amount of suggested flattery a man can swallow and enjoy. They did not realize, these pretty

buds, that the open flower has a charm of captivation quite its own, and above all that the male human of to-day requires to be amused before everything. A jolly girl is more to him than a pretty girl, or a good girl, or a clever girl ; at all events in the ordinary gatherings of society. He may not always choose the jolly girl for his wife.

In her most serious moods Vera was always interesting, if not amusing, and she had of late acquired that perfect confidence in herself that commands success as a man-magnet.

But if the girls who sat out, some few of them, yawning on sofas through the waltzes, envied the woman in black velvet whose eyes shone so attractively, and whose low laugh rang so full of unreserved fun, they did so in pure ignorance. The flattery and excitement was opium to Vera, and she had to suffer for it horribly afterwards.

When Frank Thorold, who had hovered in her vicinity most part of the evening, persuaded her to go with him to a room where sandwiches and coffee were being dispensed amongst other things, she consented with alacrity. After a better meal than she had made at dinner, she leant back in her chair and

watched him throw off a glass of port, remembering what Mrs. Grant had said about his inclination to unsteadiness. This carried her back to other memories again, and the oppression fastened upon her once more, heavily. Life seemed again worthless and disappointing, as it ever does at times to those who have no control over their moods and tenses.

“What are you thinking about so seriously?” asked her companion, approaching her with earnest eyes.

“I don’t know. I think it was— I wish you wouldn’t drink off port wine like that, as if it were water.” After she had said this, she regretted her words. What would he think?

“I!”—he looked startled. “Why, you don’t think I drink too much, do you? I give you my word I don’t—now. Once I was rather—well—I was a young fool, you know. It was after—you remember perhaps—if you haven’t forgotten. It was hard on a Johnny.” He finished his incoherent sentences with a sudden ruefulness.

Vera was silent for a moment.

“I didn’t mean to be so wicked,” she said;

“and that is what always hurts me—to think of you, how hard it was upon you, how crushing, when you respected me. It was a hateful business altogether. I was mad, and you must try and think it was temporary insanity. Perhaps you could forgive me if you knew how I have suffered since, and how truly sorry and repentant I was. I have been punished. But, above all things, don’t let me think I harmed you too.” She broke off suddenly at the end of the sentence, having more to say, but being unable to say it.

He saw the tears in her eyes, and dared not trust himself to speak either. So there was a long pause. Vera drew a difficult breath. Then he said, stretching his chest and throwing back his head, with direct practicality—

“I will drink nothing but water all the rest of my life if you ask me, I promise you, Vera—I mean Mrs. Maitland. Must I call you that? And as for doing me harm, that was my own fault for daring to think you would ever look at me. Whatever you did it would make no difference to me, though, I believe. Now I know you, I could trust you, and even if I didn’t I should love”—

Vera rose quickly and put her arm in his.

“Yes, of course ; it is very nice of you to say all that. I always knew you were a dear nice boy, nicer than anybody almost. And now take me back, please. I should not think of putting you under a vow to drink only water. I forgot when I first spoke that you are a man now.”

She felt a conviction of his strength that she could not quite explain. It might have been in his more firmly-set figure and face, or in the determined tone of his voice, expressing so much purpose and resolve.

“I am rising twenty-two,” he said, with a pleased laugh ; “and I became a man a year ago.”

CHAPTER XVII.

“ When I look back upon the naked past,
In its hushed slumber like a sleeping snake,
I shudder lest the weary coil should wake,
And wound me with its subtle pain, and cast
Its barbed stings in my face.”

R. L. BINYON.

FOR some weeks after the wedding Vera was restless and unable to work. She went back to her rooms at Oxford, feeling strangely reluctant to face solitude again, and vaguely dejected. There was no reason for dejection, as every fresh post brought her news of the enthusiasm with which “*Fractions*” was being received in all quarters. There were detractors naturally, who found flaws in her sentiment, faults in her grammar, and moonshine in her theories; but the majority of critics was well with her, and the reading public—deducting the penny patrons of the bookstalls—followed suit with alacrity. Not only this much, but more; her scheme of

a Woman's Free College did not fall upon arid ground. It was taken up warmly immediately by a certain Lady Maudesley of benevolent proclivities and a decent fortune, who possessed also a perfect talent for begging, and a marvellous system of witching money from hermetically-sealed pockets.

This lady wrote to Vera a letter of fervid eulogy and congratulation, stating, at the same time, her willingness to place herself and her energies at Vera's disposal, should she be prepared to attempt a realisation of the scheme she had so vividly imagined and graphically described in "*Fractions*." Others followed in her train, and soon the papers became dotted with little notices concerning the new effort to be made on behalf of the women of England. Vera had not time to do anything but answer the letters that flowed in upon her, many of them containing such absurd and impossible suggestions as to almost drive her mad through the necessity of answering them. Epithets piled themselves upon "*Fractions*," till the young volume was buried under the weight of them. "Your splendidly imaginative work," — "Your exquisite word-painting and masterly imagery,"

—“Your impetuous force and earnest purpose,”—“Your magnificent conception for the amelioration of women,” etc., etc., were some of the panegyrics addressed to her, with variations in the same key. They did not affect her much. After the verdict of the best critics, that she had done good work, and with restraint and caution might do still better, she did not mind a great deal what the public might say one way or the other.

And a listless exhaustion seemed to have come over her, now that the effort to create and fashion was relaxed. Every gushing letter she felt compelled to write wearied her, and had to be composed with difficulty. She was not the woman to conceive a great work and carry it through to consummation triumphantly. She had accomplished a big deed in imagination, and the long flight of fancy had tired her wings. So the weeks rolled by under a dull apathy of depression, and she looked ill and fagged.

In the depth of low spirits she drew paper to her again and wrote a short story, which she sent to a high-class magazine. It was a wail of pain all through,—the cry of an unwanted, uncared-for, unattractive woman,

breaking her heart alone, full face to starvation. It was accepted, of course, and noticed in many quarters. Folk like their emotions tickled either to laughter or tears, and untempered mirth or woe in fiction is always safe to find readers. There was not a single note of gladness, or even comfort, throughout this short narrative; consequently, it was excessively enjoyed in cosy corners, under pleasant conditions, by tender-hearted fireside pessimists and arm-chair socialists.

It was fuel to the fire, and pounds rolled in to the fund of the Woman's Free College all the faster on account of it; so fast that it was necessary to form a committee at once, and put the whole scheme into working order.

Lady Maudesley invited Vera to go to her house on a visit; so that they could talk over and arrange affairs together. Vera accepted, although she anticipated being bored to death by the gushing philanthropism of her hostess. She was agreeably disappointed, however, and soon came to the conclusion that a long stay in a country-house, packed with interesting and sportive people, was just what her jaded mind required for a time. She regained tone rapidly, and astonished everybody to distrac-

tion by the volatility of her spirits and untiring appetite for fun. Most people expected to find a hollow-eyed denunciator of woman's wrongs, foaming with indignation and panting for redress. They found her a gay, versatile coquette, ready to dance or skate or drive, ride or shoot even, and capable of any amount of frivolity upon occasion. With Lady Maudesley alone she was always earnest, as indeed she was at heart, over the dear child of her fancy—the Woman's College; but there was no diversion going on in the house which had not Veronica Maitland for its partisan, if not ringleader.

Thus her weeks slipped away until Christmas, when she went home, to find herself again amidst less congenial, if more affectionate friends, and revolved into a moderate whirl of country middle-class dissipation.

During her month in the country she read and wrote little, with the exception of letters, which shoaled in as before. Amongst these were charming ones from Mr. Gerrould, her publisher and, as she called him, "guide, philosopher, and friend." With him she discussed everything under heaven, and over, setting a high value on his opinions, and con-

sequently shining brilliantly in her own part of the correspondence, responsive to his intellectual activity. She said to herself he was the one man who had ever understood her; and she was also unwary enough to express this in a letter to Sylvia, who jumped to further conclusions instantly.

In February she went to London, taking rooms near Lady Maudesley's town house, within a circle of Lady Maudesley's friends. Here she received devotees, male and female; and hither, amongst others, came Mr. Gerould, for many a long and exhaustive conversation. Their friendship thrived mightily, and heads were wagged by persons of gossiping proclivities; but Vera chose not to see the wagging.

Till one day, as he and she were talking over the Woman's Free College, and Vera was stating her ardent desire that it should be called the Garrick Hall, or Maitland Hall, he asked her point-blank whether it were true that she had not been actually married to the man whose name she had assumed.

When she answered, very haughtily, that the matter concerned herself alone, but that to satisfy his curiosity, she would own that she

had no claim to the title, he apologised hastily ; and before she could recover her tranquillity, she found he was making her a proposal of marriage.

Her first impulse was to reject him outright, in such a manner as to leave no sediment of hope behind ; her second, that, as in him she would find a guide and incentive, it would be wise to temporise for the present, and hold him till her mind might become fast settled.

She wavered, therefore, and in the end Gerrould went away tolerably well satisfied with her answer.

That was in February. In April she readjusted her toilette and plunged into a maelstrom of society divertisement, whither her exceptional talent and success delivered her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“In my breast,
Alas ! two souls have taken their abode,
And each is struggling there for mastery !
One to the world, and the world’s sensual pleasures,
Clings closely with scarce separable organs :
The other struggles to redeem itself
And rise from the entanglements of earth.”

GOETHE.

It was under the protection of Lady Maudesley’s undisputed chaperonage, that Vera was first presented to royalty, as the author of “*Fractions*,” and promoter of the Woman’s Free College.

The event took place at the house of a very distinguished artist, at a private view on “Show Sunday.” The studios, drawing-rooms, and staircase were packed with smart people, and Vera was feeling extremely chaotic amidst the babble and flux, when she was rendered twenty times more so by an agitated communication from Lady Maudesley, to the effect that the Prince had arrived

unexpectedly, and had expressed a wish, overheard by her, that Mrs. Maitland should be presented to him.

When she had listened to some very pretty compliments, and made one or two inane acknowledgments of the same, Vera was relieved to find herself permitted to retire from the Presence, with an angry feeling at her core, that such an ordinary honour could overturn and render her unnatural. Why could she not have been her own easy, confident self with the pleasant Personage, who was certainly the last man in the world to suggest stiffness or restraint by his own manner?

Frightened by the brocaded ghost of etiquette behind him, and awed by the undergrowths of centuries lying coiled up in a passionate loyalty within her, she had been for the moment supremely influenced by the class from which she had sprung; a class to which the court is a far-off unreality, and royalty a name for pomp and majesty. Now she felt hot and irritated against herself for not having been able to shake off mediæval remnants and childish tradition more wholly, so as to have done justice to her powers of repartee and conversation.

She seated herself in a corner of the wide window-seat, and was soon crowded in by the people who came to get a word with or a look at her. She saw the Prince glance at her from time to time in an interested way, and thought to herself he was wondering how such a blushing fool could write so decent a book !

“ Well, what do you think of Royalty ? ” asked Lord Maudesley, coming presently to look after her, and bringing a cup of tea, which he had practised some skill and diplomacy in obtaining.

“ He is very masculine,” she answered dreamily.

Lord Maudesley looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“ Yes ? ” he said ; you mean ”—

She laughed.

“ Exactly ; that is just what I mean. And besides, he is kindly, magnetic, easy-going, and fond of pleasure, so he will make us a splendid king some day.”

“ He is certainly all that you say ; but you know there are some puritans who shake their heads over him, and threaten revolution and a republic.”

“ Absurd ! ” Vera showed three white

teeth. "A monarch who does not interfere with the State, minds his own business, and scatters plenty of money broadcast, may live as he likes in this constitutional nineteenth century of ours, for aught the English nation cares! It is distressing, but I fear it's true. Read what half"—

She stopped suddenly, and her eyes dilated, as she caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd, and beheld advancing towards her a well-straightened figure. Her heart seemed to stop for a second, as she recognised Fordyce Dalton! The first time she had seen him since they had parted at the Ford Grants, nearly two years ago.

"You were saying"—said Lord Maudesley.

"How do you do, Miss Grace—Mrs. Maitland? I hope you have not forgotten an old friend," broke the well-known voice upon her ear, sending a painful arrow of memory through her consciousness, and Captain Dalton was holding out his hand.

The dark eyes shot through hers a glance that seemed to numb all her faculties, as she mechanically laid her hand in the proffered one, and answered the greeting. In a flash,

all the old sensations poured back upon her, and she felt the power of the man stronger than ever over her. She made an indifferent effort to maintain composure in introducing him to Lord Maudesley, but her tongue was absolutely paralysed, and she could not utter another word.

He talked on quietly, drawing Lord Maudesley into conversation upon all the topics of the moment—the pictures, the Prince, and “*Fractions*.” There never was any one more unruffled and composed than this cavalry officer was now, in the presence of the woman to whom he was an objective conscience. It was part of his creed to be serene under all circumstances, and he lived up to it.

“May I come and see you?” he asked, by and by, when the other man had turned to speak to some one else. It was in a manner as if he were Vera’s oldest and most esteemed friend.

She almost gasped.

“No,” she answered directly. “Please don’t. I cannot—I am alone—I—do not want to see you again.”

“You are very cruel;” he lowered his voice, in which he put absolutely no inflection;

"but you cannot refuse to meet me, and I can find out where you are likely to be. I have never had a really happy moment since I saw you last. You may believe it or not."

"I do believe it. How could you be happy? Do you deserve to be?" She spoke impetuously, meeting his eyes with defiance, only to abase hers before his daring gaze.

He did not answer for a moment.

"Are *you* happy?" he said finally. "You are such a social success, that I suppose you are; but you must forgive me for saying that you look neither a happy nor a tranquil woman."

He had closed her in from all outsiders now by the curtain of the painted window, and she could not escape.

"I am not unhappy," she declared. "Although I ought to be, God knows! Tranquil I was never, nor ever could be."

"You could," he said, "be both happy and tranquil, if you would let me prescribe for you."

She laughed, but not merrily.

"Your prescription, my good physician, would not probably be worth its fee," she said.

"My remedy would be homœopathic, 'a

hair of the dog that bit you.'” He smiled languidly. “Will you listen to it now, or shall I wait for a more fitting opportunity?”

“Thanks, yes. I will not have it now. I want none of your remedies. I am not sure that I would care to be happy and tranquil either. Sorrow is the true fertiliser of thought, and restlessness generates deeds.”

“Is that a quotation from ‘*Fractions*’? I seem to recognise it. Is ‘Vivian Heriot’ intended for me?”

Vera blushed. The character in question had managed to grow somewhat like Dalton.

“If you think so, I imagine you are not flattered!” she said. “I would advise you not to be trying on caps—you might regret it.”

“Oh, I know I am nothing but a knave and traitor in your eyes, so that no further opinion can hurt me much,” he said; “but, after all your criticism and your condemnation of me, you don’t hate me, and you are not indifferent to me. I know that.”

She could not say a word to deny it.

“Let me come and see you?” he asked again, with the same old brilliant smile, bending over her as he spoke.

She raised her eyes and looked full into

his, feeling herself growing weaker as they met. She could not say "No" again, and she would not say "Yes." So the long look terminated in silence.

Then she rose and put out her hand.

"I must go," she said.

He offered to accompany her, but she refused steadily. Once out of his presence, she felt she could think clearly.

Is it to come all over again? That was the problem she meditated upon during her drive home. Am I to fall under the spell again, and lose myself, the better self I have gained? Is it to be without a struggle?

She went straight home and studied herself all the rest of the day and night, thinking again and again of her one true, healthy love for Garry; of her regeneration, and of the power that had come to her through that love.

Is an unholy influence to destroy all my efforts and defeat all my noblest aims? she reflected. Never! She went to sleep exhausted with the mental struggle, and awoke in the morning to laugh at her fears, and defy danger.

In the daylight, romance and sentiment be-

come strangely filmy. After all, what had the temptation been that she had fought against last night? Positively a phantasm of her creation, nothing more!

Two days later, Captain Dalton called upon her, but she was not alone. He did not stay long nor talk much, but he looked at her a great deal, and said something about seeing her later when he went. After that she scarcely went anywhere without meeting him, and he was so often at her side that the glances of the public followed them with smiles. Yet she was never alone with him till one day. She ran into him at Victoria, and he insisted upon taking her home thence in a hansom. She protested, but yielded, and soon they were bowling along in the twilight.

He talked of casuals for some time, then at last he said—

“When are you going to let me have your answer?”

“My answer!” she ejaculated.

“Yes: the real answer to the question I have asked you over and over again, though not in so many words. You know that I have never changed; that I love you as much as ever.”

“Love!” Vera laughed unsteadily. “I suppose you told your wife you loved her, did you not? Please believe, Captain Dalton, that I am not rich, and that all the money I have goes to the College.”

There was a pause.

“That is rather an uncalled-for insult, isn’t it?” he said unemotionally.

She apologised. Never having believed in his love for her, she did not now; but she was ashamed of her unmitigated rudeness, and added more civilly—

“How could you love me? I should think you must hate the sight of me!”

“I don’t,” he replied. “I’m frightfully in love with you. You have always interested me, and never bored me. Of course I don’t pretend to be better than other men, nor that I have never indulged in—flirtations—let us say. But with you it is different, and I promise you the feeling I have for you has never been shared by any one else.”

“You were false to your wife, and you would be false to me!” cried Vera, at the same time annoyed with herself for stooping to discuss with him.

“I was false to my wife because of you,” he

said. "Are you to blame me for *that*? Any other woman would love me for it."

"Never believe it!" she burst out vehemently. "You deceive yourself! A woman could not love a man for such a reason as that."

"Why not?"

"Because"—she could think of nothing further to say, except—"the gods only know what makes a woman love a man. I don't."

"Then accept my solution and be satisfied. Because I dared to show my feelings to you when a fainter-hearted man might have desisted on the score of virtue, you love me. You must; for I will have you, Vera, whatever you say."

He possessed himself of her hand as he spoke.

Her breath came very fast, and she felt almost suffocated in her efforts to free herself from the coil that was wringing out her strength. Tremors were running through her, and she was inexpressibly thankful when at that moment the cab stopped at her door.

"Good-bye," she said, on the steps. "You cannot come in now; I am expecting some

friends this afternoon. Go away, please. Good-bye."

He lifted his hat and walked away with that peculiar tread proper to gamefowl and cavalry men, suggestive of spurs and swagger.

Vera watched him get back into the cab again without the slightest variation of expression on his strongly-cut, dissolute face; and then, entering the house quickly, she shut the door behind her, and stood with her back against it, laughing strangely.

CHAPTER XIX.

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together: our virtues would be proud, if our faults whipped them not; and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherished by our virtues.”—SHAKESPEARE.

THERE was no prettier morning room than Sylvia Gordon's in all Oxford, and no more satisfied occupant than that little lady herself, as she sat there one fine morning in May, reading studiously. She was much changed from the Sylvia who had loved her books so well when she was “in maiden meditation fancy free,” for now she found all her will required to keep her attention on the pages before her. Every few minutes her glance wandered from the volume to the draped curtains before the alcove where the piano stood, or rested with a pleased smile of approbation on the new brass and iron lamp with its softly-coloured shade, delicately harmonising with the tints of the wall-paper. In short, not to

put too fine a point upon it, Sylvia had developed the most housewifely fondness for upholstery since her marriage, and her whole mind was continually occupied with ideas for the improvement of her rooms, and the concern that they should look indisputably charming.

Noel was very much amused. He had been quite prepared to ground his wife in all the 'ologies of which he was master, had she cared to become his pupil ; but he was not at all sorry to see her making her home a study instead. Indeed he had quite enough pupils without her, and to come home to a dear little commonplace wife was vastly better for him than to be met with inky fingers and rueful frowns over the terrible five-barred problems of Euclid. They had been married now nearly a year, and he had watched her settle into happy contentment with some relief, having felt, as acutely as a man could, the responsibility he had incurred in having taken her from a luxurious home, and from the pursuit of learning on which she had seemed bent.

She made a delightful wife ; interested in all the things he loved, and intelligent enough

to enter fully into all his intellectual pleasures.

Indeed she still fancied that she thirsted for knowledge herself, being loath to confess that her own little nest of a house furnished her more food for meditation than all the speculations of philosophy ever crammed into books. But it is an accepted view of society that two very learned people in a house are almost sure to come upon a bone of contention sometimes in the course of their wanderings into the blue fields of ancient and modern culture, and perhaps accepted views are occasionally correct. The hypothesis that really intellectual persons control their passions might be useful here; but there are some practical individuals who want all hypotheses illustrated by facts; which is awkward.

At all events, the possible danger in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon was averted by Sylvia's new attitude. She still loved books, but for Noel's sake; her house she loved for its own. Is not this most natural and feminine?

The quaint little clock over the chimney-piece was pointing nearly to the luncheon

hour, when a step on the polished oak floor of the hall caught Sylvia's quick ear, and she raised her head, this time to gaze at the door, which was soon opened by Noel, carrying a bundle of papers.

"Oh, letters!" exclaimed Sylvia, darting up from her seat, and flinging one arm round his neck for a due kiss. "Is there one for me, Noel? Yes, I know there is, and from Vera; I know by your smile."

She reached for the papers, which he held at arm's length.

"I believe," he said, with mock seriousness, "all these letters are for me; most of them University correspondence. Do you really expect a letter? Why, you had one yesterday."

"But not from Vera; she has not written for weeks,—not since she told me what Mr. Gerrould had said. I am sure something has happened."

"You are sure that Miss Veronica Grace, otherwise Mrs. Maitland, has engaged herself to Mr. Gerrould. Is not that it, now?"

"What if I have my suspicions? You first put them into my head by saying you were sure Vera would marry. Oh,

don't plague me, Noel! I must have my letter!"

He gave it to her, watching her face as she opened the bulky envelope, in which a good many large sheets of very close writing were packed. Presently a bright look danced over her face.

"I was right; it is coming," she said. She had read through the first sheet, and now attacked the next.

"Might we have luncheon?" suggested Noel mildly. "The letter will wait, won't it? And I am as hungry as a shark."

She stuffed the letter into her pocket mournfully, and went with him to the next room.

"Does Vera say, then, that she is going to marry the literary man?" he asked, when a well-stocked plate before him began to show diminishing symptoms.

"You wouldn't let me finish, and I had only got to where she said she had some personal news for me which she knew would astonish and perhaps shock me very much."

"Why shock you? You won't be shocked, will you?"

"Of course!" promptly. "Is it not shock-

ing that another poor thing should be sacrificed on the altar of Hymen? Ah, if she only knew!"

He laughed.

"And what was the first page all about?" he asked. "Circling round the main point, I suppose, and preparing you for the *dénouement*."

"Yes. Poor Vera! she feels uncomfortable about it, I know. She thinks I shall gibe at her for breaking her word, when she told me she would never marry. But, after all, I believe it will be for Vera's good to marry such a man as Mr. Gerrould appears to be."

"Don't be too sure she is going to marry him," said her husband. "There is never any possibility of forestalling Miss—Mrs. Maitland's movements. Perhaps she is going into a nunnery."

"Vera turned Catholic would be funny," said Sylvia. "I could better imagine her becoming a Buddhist. Indeed, I think she has a tendency that way."

"If she could only make up her mind to be something, perhaps she would be happier," remarked Gordon reflectively.

"Now that is absurd, Noel!" Sylvia de-

clared. "Only yesterday you said how impossible it was to pin your colours to any particular dogma, you know you did, when I wanted you to go to Christ Church with me, and you wanted an excuse to stay at home."

"My dear, I am a man. A woman requires the girdle of a superstition as much as she requires corsets, possibly more. You see it's a question of physique very often."

"Oh, bosh! Men are much more evilly disposed than women, therefore they require more moral support. You can't deny *that*."

"I can't deny you anything, my darling."

"Then that disposes of the argument. I begin Whately, Jevon, and Mill to-morrow, Aristotle the next day—mind that. And now, may I read my letter, please?"

"Certainly. Will you not read it aloud?"

"I will read it myself first, and then tell you what she says," said Sylvia in her most dignified manner. She read:

"MY DARLING SYLVIA,—I am having a mighty fine time up here in town, and am in splendid health and spirits. I have so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin, but perhaps I had better start on the W. F. C."

(Woman's Free College), "which is really and truly on the point of being built at last, I understand. It will cost a great deal more money than I estimated at first, but help will continue to arrive, I feel sure, for such a good cause. The worst argument we have to fight is, that the class of sufferers is small compared to other wretched classes who require assistance. But my answer is, that there is money enough to help all, if we only go the right way to get at it. I calculate already that the W. F. C. has given employment to scores of people, especially postmen. I feel sure their number has had to be increased, from personal experience. And in the future, think of the occupation we shall secure for numbers of educated people! There is always work for the skilled worker in every craft—even in teaching three-year-olds nursery rhymes. But I must not drivel on about my scheme, or I shall never be able to find room for the rest of my information. Did I tell you Mr. Gerrould said if I did not take care, I should become a prey to a diseased imagination? He meant that I gave mine too much licence, and that it might at any time bulge into disorder. It is quite true, Sylvia dear. I do not discipline myself enough.

I am so horribly weak still. Do you believe it is possible for one ever to overcome the Will—the carnal will of Schopenhauer, and the saints of old? I am actually struggling to find out whether one's character is made inside or outside one's self, and whether, like the body, it is ripe at a certain age, and then no amount of striving can add an inch, or take off a corner. You know my story. I had a happy-go-lucky childhood and girlhood before my nut became kernelled (my skull-nut, you understand), then— But why should I drag you into metaphysical speculation, which I know you detest, when I have some personal news to tell you that I am afraid will astonish and perhaps shock you very much?

“Sylvia, dear, I'm going to be married!

“I have struggled against it with all my might, but something is too strong for me, and I am afraid that something is inclination. You know, in my heart I want to be true to Garry, that he holds always a position none can usurp. But I am so restless, and I feel convinced nothing will ever fix me but marriage. Sometimes I think it was a providential thing Garry did not live to share the commonplaces of wedded life with me. I imagine myself

finding out in him the little faults and failings so much harder to tolerate than larger errors, and falling into the horribly accustomed ways of conjugality with all the fire and light gone out, only the smoke of indifference or mere forbearance left. I imagine him getting tired of my exactions (a loving woman is always most exacting), my irritability, and my face—simply bearing my presence because I am his wife; or, at the best of things, loving me only from habit, and seeing all my flaws with naked eyes. I imagine all this, and then give a sigh of relief. That is one mood. In another I feel that nothing could have taken the poetry out of life with Garry, and that I should have become a grander woman by reason of my continual effort to keep level with his ideal.”

(“Oh, when *is* she coming to the point?” burst out Sylvia here, impatient of all this digression, which had not even the merit of freshness.)

“However, I might have failed in my effort to keep Garry a lover, and then my heart would have broken. Now, the man I have promised to marry could never break my heart, even with a crowbar. He will not disappoint

me much, because I shall never make an idol of him. I am afraid you will be sorry when I tell you his name.

“It is Frank Thorold. I know you would rather it should be Mr. Gerrould; but I couldn’t, Sylvia. Frank touches my fancy; and I like the sensation his presence and his contact give me. I couldn’t bear Mr. Gerrould to touch me. That is the whole top and bottom of it.”

Here Sylvia could contain herself no longer.

“O Noel, Noel! What do you think? O Vera! you lunatic! you cannot mean it! Noel, she is going to marry Frank Thorold.”

“What!” exclaimed her husband, and the two gazed at each other for a few minutes, then burst out laughing.

“What about the editor?” asked Gordon at length; but she did not hear him. She was finding her place in the letter.

“You will say I am mad and a fool” (Sylvia smiled at the truth of this), “but you must accept the fact, Sylvia, which I have long since ceased to blink,—that the material part of me is stronger than the spiritual. The blind will is utterly beyond my power of reason. This

may be a heritage, or it may be training ; but whatever it is, it actually stares me in the face. In short, I've reverted. I very nearly once accepted the pure elements of philosophy, and succeeded in subduing the lower self, to live in a sphere of rational delight, letting the surface things glide by as shadows. That was when I returned from Madeira, leaving dead Garry and all my temporal hopes behind. But it was not to last. The world came rushing back on me like an odious vampire, and its success first intoxicated and then sucked the soul out of me ; so that I am, as before, a sum of vain desires and crude sensations. The thing that settles down into wedded life with Frank Thorold will make a fairly good wife, I hope, living only for husband and home, but having no further connection with the enchanted regions of thought and fantasy. I don't think I would have married yet, if it had not been for my meeting with Captain Dalton again, which, I think I told you, took place not long since. I did not tell you that I felt his old spell over me stronger than ever ; and that he wanted to marry me. Now you know I could not marry him. It would mean moral ruin to me to be wife to a man entirely void of principle. And

I do mean to be good, if I can't be transcendental. But I was afraid of him, Sylvia, desperately afraid. You know the mysterious influence some men have over me, turning my theories and convictions and principles upside down. He is one of these, the most deadly; and I dared not pit myself against him. He seemed to be everywhere I went; and one day he met me at Victoria, and brought me home (I had been lunching with friends at Dulwich). It was then I knew that I was losing ground, and that all my strength was pliant in his hand. At home I found Frank waiting to see me. He saw I was agitated, and guessed the cause. Then he asked me for the right to protect me against the other man, and the relief was so great I said "Yes, thanks" directly. Don't laugh. He can protect me. He is very determined; delightfully full of young sap, and most beautifully in love with me. I read him very true and obstinate, as a typical Englishman should be; and this is most necessary for a man who marries a woman nearly ten years older than himself. You, I know, think it madness for a woman to place herself in the power of a man who will still be young when she is getting old and weary, and losing her

best appearance. Of course you are quite right in the abstract, but there are exceptions in the concrete. After we have been married a year, Frank will never see me at all. I know the sort of man. I am *his*; therefore I must be all that is perfection, and he will only see his own choice in me, in which, being by nature proud and self-willed, he will never confess he could err. I shall be virtually his creation, and he will be satisfied with me as such. Believe me, the majority of Englishmen look upon their wives as accepted facts, and never dream of questioning them or comparing them with other women. Let their homes be happy, their food well-cooked, and their amusements not interfered with, they care very little whether the woman who is general caterer and companion be pretty or ugly, so that she be fairly entertaining, interesting, and unfault-finding. At least this is my opinion, and to show I have the strength of it, I am going to back it by giving myself as an illustration for or against its veracity.

“We shall be married, I expect, as soon as Frank gets his commission, which I hope will not be just yet; *entre nous*, I have a holy horror of the actual deed. I like the courting

experience very much. It is delightful to be caressed and petted continually. If it were not for Garry's ghost, now, I should be happy as a kitten, I believe (with no higher happiness, you observe); and the only way I have of exorcising that dear apparition is by convincing myself that Garry's sweetheart died with him, and no longer resides in the confines of this untoward flesh. Do not think I am flippant, dear Sylvia; it is only that my thoughts about *him* lie in such painful depths, that if I stir them I must either laugh or cry passionately. I am grotesque by nature, and my Proteus-like qualities must come uppermost sometimes.

“Write soon and tell me all about your dear self and your worser half. Much as I respect Noel Gordon, I cannot say your *better* half. In talking me over, remember that every one cannot have your good luck, to marry the man of your choice, and to have that choice in complete harmony with your highest reason. If I should have daughters, I will bring them all up after Mrs. Grant's fashion, and pray they may inherit none of their mother's essential features. Above all, I will choose their companions myself, and will

never allow them too much waste time for dreaming romances. Now good-night, darling. Write soon and congratulate me on having won a good boy's love. That will be quite the correct thing to do, and I am sure Frank is a good boy: bless him! He may not have more intellect than is positively necessary to get through a pass exam.; but he has muscle, physical and moral. That is enough for me. Not more than others I deserve. Exit Vera the unlimited—Enter Vera the limited and correct. I am going to be Mrs. Grundy's pet in future. It is absurd to fancy oneself different from ordinary woman clay; one only hurts oneself, and proves nothing.—Your loving and very ordinary friend,

“VERONICA MAITLAND.


“How I shall hate giving up the name! But I always thought I would like to marry a soldier, they are so pretty, and not humdrum.”

Sylvia put down the letter, and cried—yes, actually cried over it. Noel took it up, scanned it through, then put his hand on his wife's shoulder.

“What is there to cry over, you little goose?” he asked. “She seems happy enough.”

“That is the end of Vera—the very end!” she declared impulsively. “I know it by prophetic instinct. She will become a nobody—a mere wife, as I am; thinking about nothing but wall-papers and dinners.” She laughed a little hysterically, seeing in the flash of a second her own condition of things, hitherto unsuspected. “Oh yes! it is all very well to say ‘Better so:’ doubtless it is, in my case, but Vera! with her magnificent capabilities, her glorious talents, to become a mere ‘caterer’” (the emphasis she threw on the quoted word was immense) “for a man she does not really love—it is monstrous, preposterous! Is it not really shocking, Noel, to think of Vera married to a suit of red and gold and a sword, nothing more. He is not capable of appreciating her. Oh don’t talk to me! I know Frank Thorold. Good—yes, but no mind at all; not the shred of an idea inside him.” She paused to breathe.

“Fortunately, dearest, you have not to marry him yourself,” said her husband consolingly.



Her answer was rather disconcerting.

“I wish I could ; then Vera would be rescued,” she said emphatically.

“And may I ask what would become of me ? Would you resign me to Veronica ?”

“She would not have you—disgustedly ; “you’re too intellectual for Vera, she prefers fools ; and, besides, you’re not good-looking enough.”

“Thanks. Your flattery is most delicate !”

“I am in no mood for flattery.”

“Then the unpremeditated result is astonishingly successful. But be serious now, little Sylvia, or I shall begin to believe you love Vera better than me.”

She looked at him very earnestly for a moment.

“I don’t know about that,” she said, “but I believe if she had been a man I should never have married you.”

“Why ?” he asked, slightly puzzled.

“Because she would have broken my heart, and women always love best the men who hurt them the most.”

“Yes ; but they do not always marry them,” said Noel gravely.

“I would only have married a man I loved

best," avowed Sylvia, with her head high, and brown eyes burning.

This her husband had no difficulty in believing. There was nothing undecided about this small woman.

"I think," said Noel, "to return to the subject of our discourse—you have always ignored one or two details in the character of your friend. She is pre-eminently a womanly woman, and she was bound to throw her fibres of affection round some one or something. Add to this some want of balance, and"—

"Oh, don't talk about it!" cried Sylvia impatiently. "She had everything before her, and she has thrown her chance away. Frank will never satisfy her, and she will be restless as ever. She will do no more good work, but will settle down into a society woman, a mere conventional pattern plate. She will cease to take all interest in the Woman's Free College, and never write another line worthy of publication. Yes, I know perfectly well, Noel, what it will be. There is an end of Vera. You may argue as you like; but I tell you—there is an end of Vera!"

THE END.

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